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**Gendering Colonialism: The St Joan's Social and Political Alliance and the British Imperial Government in the Discourse Around Forced Marriages of African Women, 1935-1939.**

By

**Chiamaka Mariagoretti Ihuoma**

A Major Research Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of History  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2021

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Imperial Government in the Discourse Around Forced Marriages Of African Women,  
1935-1939.

by

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September 22, 2021

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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## ABSTRACT

The complexity of the British imperial endeavor is explored in this study; this is exemplified by how some elements and activities that can be considered contradictory to the interests of the empire helped to strengthen it instead. In this case, such contradictory elements include the all-women's group – St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance. In the same light, the dynamics of gender relations within the British empire are disclosed, shedding more light on the experiences of both British and indigenous women within the imperial apparatus, as well as the patterns of relationship between the two groups of women. It is shown that the Alliance's humanitarian agitations for imperial reform of marriage practices in favor of African women were inherently imperialistic. Importantly, this study also constitutes a pioneer case-study of the activities of St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance in British colonial Africa using the debate about forced marriages of African women from 1935 – 1939.

## DEDICATION

To my Parents – Vitalis and Faustina Ihuoma. *I am because you are.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The aim of this study is to examine the activities of St Joan's Social and Political Alliance women's group in British West Africa and the larger British empire. The need to examine this organization's activities stems from a realization of the existence of interesting patterns of interactions in the British Empire, especially in the gendered realm. From interactions between British Women and the State, African women and the state, diverse colonial apparatuses and, most importantly, the women on both sides of the racial divide, the whole fabric of the British empire took shape in the face of a plethora of contexts which demand scholarly attention.

Ultimately, this study will reiterate that the British Empire was a complex venture by showing how seemingly subversive activities by the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance (with the help of missionaries) helped to strengthen the British colonial enterprise in Africa instead. In this case, such activist agitations were fated to be imperialistic because they imposed western conceptions of marriage, divorce and bride price on African subjects without an attempt to adequately understand African conceptions of these ideas. Thus, St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance activities were a half-baked intervention, which was just as detrimental to the African as imperialism was. A minimal amount of interaction between the Alliance and the African women whom they were advocating for also betrays the fact that achieving equal status with British men was more prioritized than improving the welfare of African women.

St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance was founded in Great Britain in 1911. Starting out as the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society and founded by Gabrielle Jeffrey and May Kendall, it was intended to support women's suffrage movements from within the Catholic Church. The group took on the name St Joan's Social and Political Alliance in 1923 when it decided to expand its scope of activities to include all social issues that affect women generally.<sup>1</sup>The organization soon forged meaningful international liaisons

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<sup>1</sup>This information was included in the catalogue description of the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance library collection, GB 106 2SJA, Records of the St Joan's International

from which it acquired the leverage to carry out empire-wide activities, sometimes within the auspices of the League of Nations (and subsequently the United Nations).<sup>2</sup> It exists today as the St. Joan's International Alliance.

For such an important organization, there is a paucity of records and academic enquiries into its activities in African colonies. This study will fill this literary gap in the context of West Africa. Furthermore, this study attains its backdrop from the larger theme of gendered relations in the British African empire and focuses primarily on the question of whether the activities of the St. Joan's Alliance reinforced the subjugating nature of the colonial machine.

Additionally, this study will interrogate the extent that the British Imperial government cared about the welfare of African women which they governed. This will be done by analyzing the results of a 1937 enquiry into the welfare of African women in relation to forced marriages by the Imperial office, and which was influenced by the St Joan's Alliance's pressure on the government to improve the welfare of its African female subjects. Against that analysis will be a juxtaposition of secondary studies that deal with the same period. The British Imperial government's 1937 enquiry into the welfare of African women was the preamble to the 1938 White Paper on the Welfare of African women.<sup>3</sup> The findings of the enquiry affirmed that African women were generally not helplessly herded into forced marriages like the Alliance claimed. Secondary sources dealing with the same period will be cross-referenced as a means of assessing the bureaucratic accuracy and transparency of this enquiry by the imperial government.

Apart from the need to fill the historiographical gap on the activities of the Alliance in West Africa and the inquiry into the idea of a female civilizing mission, other themes are also visible throughout this study. An exploration of the relations between the

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Alliance, Women's Library Archives, London. The homepage of the collection can be accessed at

[https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/f2ac9086-f5b7-3867-82b4-ae056737e98b#:~:text=issues%20affecting%20women,-.St%20Joan's%20Social%20%26%20Political%20Alliance%20\(1923%2D1954\)%20was,saint%20of%20the%20new%20organisation.](https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/f2ac9086-f5b7-3867-82b4-ae056737e98b#:~:text=issues%20affecting%20women,-.St%20Joan's%20Social%20%26%20Political%20Alliance%20(1923%2D1954)%20was,saint%20of%20the%20new%20organisation.)

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed history of this organization will be documented in a later chapter.

<sup>3</sup> The body of primary material on which this study is based includes detailed day-to-day correspondence documents of the British government's office at this time. Enquiries were dispatched from the office of the Colonial Secretary to the offices of several governors of African colonies including Nigeria, the Cameroons, Kenya, Nyasaland, Tanganyika, Ghana and Rhodesia.

Imperial government and African women, especially within the gaze of British women and women activist groups is visible. Additionally, this is a case study of how the imperial government interacted with British women and missionary actors in the context of empire, especially in the face of activism and the idea of missionaries cooperating with such groups as the St Joan's Alliance. Summarily, this study reconfigures the discourse about indigenous women and their gendered subjugation by the colonial state to include their interactions with British women especially, but also the colonial state.

### ***HISTORIOGRAPHY: GENDER RELATIONS WITHIN THE BRITISH EMPIRE***

Gender-themed studies in the context of the British Empire range from theoretical revisionist studies that decry the exclusion of female perspectives in colonial accounts to other studies that give narrative back-up to those revisionist theories.<sup>4</sup> Iris Berger has traced the historical progression of such revisionist accounts, identifying three broad areas of interest: women as “forgotten heroines” in the 1970s, as “underclass actors” in the 1980's and early 1990's and as “gendered subjects” from the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Bright Alozie's “Female Voices on Ink” is a good example of women as “underclass actors.”<sup>6</sup> It discusses the ways that indigenous women used the system of petitioning British administrative officers to gain some measure of agency and also influence administrative practices in Eastern Nigeria.

Some other theoretically themed studies caution about the scholarly legacies of such paradigmatic shifts. Durba Ghosh's “Gender and Colonialism: Expansion or Marginalization?” is instructive here as it interrogates the ultimate effect of the explosion of historical studies in the area of gender and colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, this study identifies various trajectories of gender studies in the colonial context such as enquiries

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<sup>4</sup> A volume that goes in that direction for Western women, for example is Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Western women and imperialism: complicity and resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Iris Berger, “African Women's History: Themes and perspectives,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003), accessed August 3, 2021, *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/cch.2003.0005](https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2003.0005).

<sup>6</sup> Bright Alozie, “Female Voices on Ink: The Sexual Politics of Petitions in Colonial Igboland,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 4 (2019): 343.

<sup>7</sup> Durba Ghosh, “Gender and Colonialism: Expansion or Marginalization?,” *The Historical Journal*, 47, no. 3 (Sept. 2004): 737-755.

into sexual identities in the colonial state and the effects of the colonial enterprise on the status of indigenous women. Ultimately, it suggests that the field of gender and colonialism should be careful not to recolonize (instead of decolonize) the field of imperial history by replacing old masculine hierarchies with feminine ones, or by blindly producing gendered historical accounts while losing sight of the question of their relevance to the political nature of colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> To do this, the study advised that historians of gender and colonialism should focus on national histories and narratives and challenge the bounded fields which historians conventionally identify.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the study admonishes that the field of gender and colonialism should move towards an expansion of the larger historical enquiry into colonialism, rather than a marginalization of former trajectories in the face of the new field. In light of that suggestion, this study of the discourse around forced marriages of African women takes an all-inclusive stance. It examines the place and activities of both British and indigenous women within the auspices of imperial control, juxtaposing those activities with the influence of other branches of the empire such as administration and missionary endeavors and interrogating the influence of one aspect of empire on the other.

Looking at Ghosh's concern from another angle, however, the mass production of studies about Women's gendered experiences under colonialism has disclosed the complicity of women's agency and influence in various aspects or areas of the British Empire such as taxation, migration (both voluntary and involuntary migration), assisted migration, labor, culture and cultural reproduction, regulations of sexual intimacy, discourses surrounding racial purity and anxiety, Missionary activities and so on. Rosalind O'Hanlon's chapter in the fourth volume of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* titled "Gender in the British Empire" captures some of these themes in a solid narrative.<sup>10</sup> While Ghosh had noted that this volume and the other volumes in the series were widely criticized because of the insufficient attention which the field of gender received, some snippets of the gendered activities of both British and indigenous women can be glimpsed from them and they encompass the aforementioned themes. John

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<sup>8</sup> Ghosh, "Gender and Colonialism," 755.

<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, "Gender and Colonialism," 755.

<sup>10</sup> See the chapter in Judith Brown and Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV, The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Mackenzie's chapter in the third volume, for example, shows how British women helped to sustain metropolitan cultural practices in the colonies, thereby creating a socially stable environment for the British foreigners in the colonies.<sup>11</sup>

When considering the role of indigenous women in the empire, their contribution to, and influence on the economic activities within the empire have received widespread scholarly attention. This was highly influenced by Ester Boserup's *The Role of Women in Economic Development*.<sup>12</sup> Here, a plethora of inquiries were made, into the economic activities of African women farmers, traders, and so on and how these activities contributed to the execution of empire. The presence of women in urban centers has also revealed the agency of women in colonial urbanism. As petty-traders, domestic workers, sex workers, nationalist agitators and housewives, the feminine presence in colonial cities undeniably affected the imperial outlook.

Other parallel themes in colonial gendering also abound. Some studies generally examine the relationship between Indigenous women and the colonial state, some look at the relationship between British women and the state, others have researched extensively on the state of indigenous women in pre-colonial times in order to reveal how colonialism influenced the post-colonial perception of said women.<sup>13</sup> In light of these, this study goes beyond the idea of indirect complicity to examine the direct role of British women within the empire. It then examines the indirect impact of this on African women. Thus, it subtly explores pre-colonial gender relations in Africa and the ways that it was impacted by colonialism.

Other new studies also examine the relationship between indigenous women and British women.<sup>14</sup> While the aim is usually to interrogate how British women's

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<sup>11</sup> See John MacKenzie, "Empire and Metropolitan Cultures," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century*, edited by Roger Louise, Andrew Porter and Alaine Low (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270-293.

<sup>12</sup> Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> For indigenous women and the colonial state, see Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900-50* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). For British women and the state, see Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). For the influence of colonialism, see Kathleen Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> See for Example, Wendy Urban-Mead, "Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwena Women and E.L Price of the London Missionary Society, 1835-1881" in *Women in African Colonial Histories* edited by Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002). Elsbeth

engagement in the imperial endeavor affected African women, most of them also examined the question of perception. What kind of image did indigenous women spark in the mind of the British woman?<sup>15</sup> The special category of gendered literary material that deals with the question of perception during the colonial period includes pamphlets and books that were written by British women travelers in Africa such as Flora Shaw and Mary Kingsley. Scholarly analyses of these pioneer materials by these women travelers have also formed a remarkable field of inquiry of its own.<sup>16</sup>

The suggestion that the gendered nature of the British empire was responsible for reproducing contemporary patterns of gender marginalization has also sparked some scholarly inquiries into the nature of gender identities in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period.<sup>17</sup> In regard to that idea, this study identifies how colonial gender reconfiguration in Africa was hardly based on sufficient understanding of pre-colonial practices; a practice which can be identified as a preamble to post-colonial gender relations. Studies that deal with the masculine side of the gender divide are also prevalent since colonial ideals of masculinity not only influenced the outlook of empire, but also shaped the perception and attitude towards women. Some of these studies include titles by John Mangan and John Mackenzie.<sup>18</sup>

### ***BETWEEN BRITISH WOMEN AND THE COLONIAL STATE***

*People who believed that women ought to be free to choose husbands for themselves should realize that that idea would be thought revolutionary in nearly all countries.*  
**Dr. Norman Leys, 1935.**

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Locher-Scholten embarks on a similar enquiry for the Dutch Indies colony in *Women and the Colonial State* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> This is covered extensively in Josephine Beoku-Betts' chapter "Western Perceptions of African Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries" in *Readings in Gender in Africa* edited by Andrea Cornwall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa: Congo-Francais, Corisco and Cameroons* (London: Cass, 1897). Sylvia-Leith Ross's publications also serve as good instances for perception. These include *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* and *Beyond the Niger*. Alison Blunt's *Travel Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994) is a good example of the said secondary scholarly analysis.

<sup>17</sup> See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987). See also Murray Steven, *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: A study in African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> See John Mackenzie, *The Empire of Hunting: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)

There has been a long scholarly discourse surrounding the impact of European contact on the status of women in Africa. Among scholars of both African and European descent, the major argument is whether or not European imperial incursion into Africa restructured the social construction of gender in Africa, usually impacting the women in an adverse way. In Monica Hunter's study of the Amampondo tribe in South Africa, she observes that women were economically self-supporting, and their status was in no way servile.<sup>19</sup> After outlining some restrictions and strict routines that married women nevertheless had to follow, she maintains that these were however not conditional upon biological sex or gender but upon the fact that the women were staying with their in-laws.<sup>20</sup> Hunter also gives instances of where conditions like age superseded gender when it came to according respect or rights to a woman.<sup>21</sup> Hunter further identified the visibility and agency of Pondo women in the public sphere, usually through the vehicle of religion/spirituality as diviners, and which also opened them to participation and influence in the domain of politics. According to Hunter, this social organization was disrupted by European colonization, which revolutionized Pondo women's economic life and brought a totally different conception of the position of women in society.

Hunter's study betrays a hint of Ifi Amadiume's sociological theory about the fluidity of gender roles in pre-colonial Africa. Examining the women of Nnobi in Eastern Nigeria, Amadiume reveals that the pre-colonial conception of gender in African societies was not as rigid as that of Europe at the time, where women were largely subservient to men by virtue of their gender. She terms this "Female husbands" and "male daughters," which connotes the idea that women sometimes played the role of men when they found themselves the opportunity, and men were sometimes considered as women.<sup>22</sup> In Zambakari's words, she argues that where decentralization was a mode of governance, power was diffuse; there were multiple centers of power, and the ruler did not rule autocratically by himself.<sup>23</sup> Amadiume elsewhere also asserted that this social

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<sup>19</sup> Monica Hunter, "The Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Status of Pondo Women," *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 6 no. 3 (July 1933): 260.

<sup>20</sup> Hunter, "The Effects of Contact with Europeans," 264.

<sup>21</sup> Hunter, "The Effects of Contact with Europeans," 267.

<sup>22</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Zambakari, "A Discourse on the Legacy of Colonialism for Women in Africa," *Africa Policy Journal* Vol. 14 (Spring 2019): 50.



construct of gender fluidity which sometimes manifested in the form of woman-woman marriage was not only practiced among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria (among whom Amadiume's study was based) but also in various other African societies. She asks, "What then was the meaning of marriage (as an important aspect of gender relations in the colonial period) in precolonial Africa?"<sup>24</sup> We do not know because the Eurocentric model of a man dominating the woman has become the dominant measuring tool. Amadiume's and Hunter's theories have been corroborated by other studies which usually agree with the idea that African woman suffered a "loss of status" under colonialism. A good number of such studies are examined by Margaret Strobel in "African Women," and a quite comprehensive account of this process is documented by Kathleen Sheldon.<sup>25</sup> This study also corroborates this idea. As will be seen, the pre-colonial social and political autonomy which African women enjoyed became limited with the advent of colonialism. In the Gold Coast, for example, the growing importance of cocoa as a cash crop coupled with the European ideal of masculine superiority increased the control of Ghanaian men over their women's labor.

The implication of the above prologue is that British women indeed enjoyed less autonomy at this time when compared to African women. As noted in the 1937 *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women in Africa*, Dr. L.S.B Leakey opined that English marriage laws had not necessarily worked for the happiness of the men and women in England as they did not really make for equality and happiness.<sup>26</sup> According to a description of the document, "he did not say that the position of native married women was ideal, but he certainly believed that in a number of ways, it was better from the point of view of equality and freedom than the position of married women in so-called civilized England."<sup>27</sup> Apparently, the social configuration of gender relations in Britain at this time gave women less autonomy, which is conceptualized in the idea of the public and private spheres, of which women were strictly required to be confined in the latter. The rise of

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<sup>24</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London: Zed Books Limited, 1997), 21.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Strobel, "African Women," *Signs* 8 no. 1 (Autumn 1982) and Kathleen Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> British colonial office, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women in Tropical Africa 1935-37* (London: British Colonial Office, 1937), 2.

<sup>27</sup> British colonial office, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women*, 2 .

feminist movements and women activist groups that strove to display their agency in the face of male domination attests to this situation. The aim of this section, therefore, is to examine the various ways that the British women who navigated this social terrain were visible in an empire which was both literally and figuratively considered a masculine endeavor.

The studies examined in the first sub-section below will consider the different capacities which women operated in the empire, including as travelers, housewives, missionary, nurses, teachers, and so on. Those of the second sub-section will briefly consider British women's activism and the role of women activist groups vis-à-vis the empire. Examining the place of British women in the empire as well as the role of women activists and activist groups in the empire will provide context for the rest of the study by disclosing the mindset of British women while negotiating the welfare of African women with the colonial state and in dealing with African women themselves. Ultimately, this study agrees with Strobel, Hunter and others by showing that African women did experience some "loss of status" as a result of British imperialism, and also shows how they had to navigate that situation within the British colonial apparatus. It argues that British women should really have recognized and decried those effects of colonialism, rather than framing the narrative of rescuing African women from their male counterparts.

### ***BRITISH WOMEN IN COLONIAL AFRICA***

It is no longer news that British women participated actively in empire both passively and actively. Their roles and actions as witnesses of the British empire can be glimpsed from various studies, and these are visible from various domains and geographical locations. For example, as much as British women in Africa displayed imperial visibility, their counterparts in the metropole also contributed towards the empires. The initial conception of (and, indeed, prescribed role for) British women in the empire was as the wives and supporters of the male proponents of the empire, and this usually took on varied outlooks depending on if the colony was a settler colony or a non-settler colony. Examples of both situations can be glimpsed from the works of Claudia Knapman in her study of white women in Fiji and Helen Calloway in her study of

Nigeria.<sup>28</sup> Both studies were analyzed side-by-side in Jane Haggis' "Gendering Colonialism or Colonizing Gender."<sup>29</sup>

Knapman's study delineates the ways in which the presence of white women in Fiji increased the intensity of racial segregation there and which resulted in the discouragement of inter-racial relations especially between white men and Fijian women. Knapman also notes that this situation was not of the making of the British woman because the social norm of racial superiority and civilized conduct which the white woman was expected to follow in the colony was prescribed by the white man. Hence, "white women have been blamed for racial intolerance because white men thought they were weak and so pure that contact with black people was morally and physically repulsive."<sup>30</sup> Karen Hansen modified this argument in her study of Northern Rhodesia by insisting that as complicated a role as gender played in this development, it was indeed the insistence on British class-bound practices that created this rift.<sup>31</sup> In Helen Callaway's study of the non-settler Nigerian colony, she notes that white women were initially proscribed from coming to stay with their husbands until the 1920's when it was decided that men needed the emotional stability of a family setting in order to perform their imperial duties efficiently.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the ultimate outcomes in both types of colonies were similar: women were hardly allowed into colonial service except as wives or in strictly feminine roles such as teaching and nursing.

Wendy Urban-Mead's study of Bessie Price – the wife of Roger Price who was an agent of the London Missionary Society (LMS) – and three other African women in colonial Botswana reflects this ideology as she disclosed that Bessie's idea of her work as a woman was to support that of her husband. The norm was that most of these women usually began to desire more agency over time. In the case of Bessie Price, she ventured

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<sup>28</sup> Claudia Knapman, *White Women in Fiji 1835-1930: The Ruin of Empire?* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986) and Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Jane Haggis, "Colonizing Gender or Gendering Colonialism: Recent Women's Studies Approaches to the Study of White Women in the History of British Colonialism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, nos. 1 & 2, (1990): 105-115.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Haggis, "Colonizing Gender or Gendering Colonialism," 107.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Hansen, "White Women in a Changing World: Employment, Voluntary Work and Sex in Post-World War II" in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 247-268.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Haggis, "Colonizing Gender or Gendering Colonialism," 109.

into teaching. Most other women ventured into missionary endeavors by joining different missions in Africa, usually in order to derive some emotional or spiritual satisfaction. It can be argued that activism – as practiced by groups like the St. Joan’s Alliance – could have been motivated by such desires as well.

Another form of British women’s participation in the colonial enterprise in Africa was as employees of the empire which initially was usually in the role of teachers, secretaries, governesses and nurses. Dea Birkett has documented the activities of the Colonial Nursing Association (CNA) in colonial West Africa.<sup>33</sup> The association was charged with the recruitment of nurses from Britain to the African colonies and Birkett notes the enthusiasm with which young, unmarried British women took up employment in West Africa because of access to social and sexual freedoms which were otherwise not accessible to them in the metropole. Importantly, she also documents the focus on femininity and physical appearances in the selection process for the nurses. Other organizations across Africa such as the Women’s Corona Society (WCS) and the West African Medical Staff also imported nurses from Britain. As for the teaching profession, Aili Tripp’s study of Uganda serves as sufficient background to how it was organized in African colonies.<sup>34</sup> Women gradually found their way into administrative positions in the empire as well, sometimes due to pressure from feminist groups such as St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance. For example, the correspondence used in this study shows that the appointment of Madam Margery-Perham as an education minister in the colony of Tanganyika was due to the influence of the Alliance. This discloses the fact that British women found more empowerment in their imperial engagements.

Furthermore, the employment of women in the African colonial service could hardly have been possible without the practice of assisted migration. According to Barbara Bush, “emigration was a solution to the post-war ‘excess of females’ and a policy of definite control and supervision of emigration by the imperial government was

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<sup>33</sup> Dea Birkett, “The White Woman’s Burden in the White Man’s Grave: The introduction of British Nurses in Colonial West Africa”, in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 177-190.

<sup>34</sup> Aili Mari Tripp, “A New Look at Colonial Women: British Teachers and Activists in Uganda, 1898-1962,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 123-156.

advocated to forestall emigration of ‘able-bodied men.’”<sup>35</sup> The primary body in charge of this was the Society for the Overseas Settlement of British Women (SOSBW), which was founded in 1919.

A special category of British women in African colonies took up the vocations of travelling/exploration and writing about the colonies. Women like these include Mary Kingsley, Sylvia-Leith Ross, Mary Haul, Mary Gaunt, and so on. Several scholarly studies have examined various aspects of the impact of these women’s activities on the empire especially with regards to perceptions.<sup>36</sup> Some of these women such as Flora Shaw and Annette Beveridge form another category of British women who were more or less strong pillars and crusaders of empire. These women embodied everything that a British woman in the imperial setting was required to be and more. They were charismatic and made outstanding contributions to the empire.

These women can be contrasted with the group of women examined in this study, who forged their own identity apart from the imperial apparatus to constitute feminist activist groups and agitate for reform all over the empire. The irony is that both groups of women *did* make outstanding contributions to empire but in different ways. While the former helped to strengthen the existing gender ideals in the empire, the latter group can be credited for giving the empire a progressive outlook.

### ***THE ROLE OF FEMINIST AND OTHER WOMEN ACTIVIST GROUPS IN THE EMPIRE.***

Women activist groups were very visible in the British Empire especially from the early twentieth century. Clare Midgley in *Feminism and Empire* argues that the rise of modern feminism in Britain was rooted in British imperialism, and she places this to be

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Bush, “Feminizing Empire? British Women’s Activist Networks in Defending and Challenging Empire from 1918 to Decolonization,” *Women’s History Review* 25 no. 4, (2016): 506.

<sup>36</sup> For Mary Kingsley, see Alison Blunt, *Travel, Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1994). For Sylvia Leith-Ross, see Lucy Watson, “True Fictions: Subjectivity and Intertextuality in the Writings of Sylvia Leith-Ross,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 3 (2013): 331-347. See also Sally Ulmer “British Women Travelers: Challenging and Reinforcing Victorian Notions of Race and Gender,” *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II* 20, Article 7 (2015), 1-38; and Cheryl McEwan, *Gender, Geography and Empire: Victorian Women Travelers in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2020).

between the 1790s and 1860s.<sup>37</sup> Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe’s study further accounts for how the inter-war years of 1919-1939 heralded the increasing influence of Women activist groups in the empire and how these groups branched out into the international scene from the European metropolises.<sup>38</sup> This was readily influenced by the First World War in which women suffered greatly but were expressly excluded from the peace talks. Barbara Bush terms this the “feminization” of empire, and her perspective is that women became very proactive in this period both as critics and defenders of empire.<sup>39</sup> This was not only in the capacity of feminism but non-feminist activism as well. This will also make a lot of sense when it is considered that women’s activism in the empire helped to strengthen it because most female activist groups espoused imperial ideology and were really agitating to be visible and enjoy more freedoms than patriarchy offered. For example, the focus women group of this study – the St. Joan’s Social and Political Alliance – also expressed such ideology in a statement on the status of women of native races which was presented to the League of Nations on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1937 thus: “We do not wish to deny that European influence has had a civilizing effect. Wandering and warlike tribes have been pacified and stabilized. Slavery has been abolished, as well as cannibalism and ritual murders which were previously tribal customs...”<sup>40</sup> Further comments like this can be glimpsed throughout that paper and some other documents by the Alliance.

Sharp and Ingrid further attribute this development to the 1918 actualization of women’s suffrage. Because of the granting of suffrage to women, “the common bond of ‘political powerlessness’ dissipated,” and women felt more empowered to venture into international activism.<sup>41</sup> Discourses around the advantages of a domesticated empire, where male and female energies played complementary roles were also prevalent in this period and gave more impetus to women’s activist efforts.

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<sup>37</sup> Clare Midgley, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, “Women’s International Activism During the Inter-War Period, 1919–1939,” *Women’s History Review* 26 no. 2, (2017): 163-172.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Bush, “Feminizing Empire?” 499.

<sup>40</sup> Extract from League of Nations Document, A. 14.1937.V, CO847/9/5S.

<sup>41</sup> Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12. Quoted in Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, “Women’s International Activism During the Inter-War Period,” 169.

A major theme to be noted in the activism of women during the imperial period was the presence of feminist activism in the settler colonies as well; both as transplants from the metropole, and as indigenous settler developments. Sometimes, as Barbara Bush noted, the ideologies of settler feminists and activists came in conflict with those of the metropole.<sup>42</sup> Some other themes to be glimpsed in the activities of women activists in the empire include the interplay of age and class in influencing the interest of women in activism. Bush notes how class was a major factor in the activism of women with middle and upper-class women having a greater profile in women's activism.

In the domain of age, Jessica Thurlow's study has detailed how middle and older aged women who started activism in their younger years kept the flame of women's activism burning and by the 1950s, experienced great difficulties in recruiting younger women to engage in activism.<sup>43</sup> She also notes another theme which is the connection between women's activism and female Members of Parliament most of whom belonged to or headed such activist groups.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, she delineates the process by which women activists, especially the feminist-inclined ones navigated the contradictions of religion, specifically Catholicism, and feminism. This was against the background that the religious role which was prescribed for women was that of submission and home keeping. In the case of St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, the choice of St Joan as a patron saint was in the effort to counter the traditional catholic conception of women as either virtuous like the Virgin Mary, or sinful like Eve.<sup>45</sup> St. Joan's heroic image was well suited for this purpose. In the choice of the Alliance's official colors, empathy towards catholic ideology can also be seen as they chose the color blue in commemoration of the Virgin, and the colors white and gold in commemoration of the papacy.

Among the menfolk, women's activism sparked mixed opinions. As will be shown later in this study, some men (especially missionaries) accepted and worked hand

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<sup>42</sup> In "Feminizing Empire," Bush touches on how this played out in Kenya and Rhodesia. Donal Lowry on the other hand gives an account of one of such settler activists and her activities in "White Woman's Country: Ethel Tawse Jollie and the Making of White Rhodesia," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23 no.2 (1997): 259-281.

<sup>43</sup> Jessica Bronwyn Thurlow, "Continuity and Change in British Feminism, C. 1940-1960" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006), 122-126.

<sup>44</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 115-121. Some examples she listed are Nancy Astor, Mavis Tate, Edith Summerskill, Lena Jagor, Eleanor Rathbone and so on.

<sup>45</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 276.

in hand with these women. However, a lot of studies have documented how women activists were viewed as “busy bodies” who did not understand the administrative implications of running an empire; and how men decried the “female values of compassion and concern for the welfare of the colonized.”<sup>46</sup> On 28 November 1939, during the episode of the agitation by St Joan’s Alliance to abolish forced marriage in the African colonies, one Mr. Chadwick of the colonial office in Britain wrote that “it is a source of perpetual amazement for me that an Executive committee consisting of ten unmarried ladies as against three married ones and presided over by a well-meaning Archdeacon, should concern itself with lurid details such as these.”<sup>47</sup> Another British official wrote in 1940 that “I hope the Alliance will now leave West Africa alone for a bit.”<sup>48</sup>

The significance of the foregoing historiographical enquiry to this study is embedded in the provision of a historical context from which the St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance emerged. This might be helpful in estimating some of the influences behind the Alliance’s activities. This study will now look at how the triangular interactions of the Alliance, The British colonial government and African women in regard to the discourse around forced marriages. A note to be made is how British women, with the example of the members of the St Joan’s Alliance navigated the terrain of racial discrimination while campaigning for the welfare of colonized women.

### ***SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY***

This study makes extensive use of archival documents which include papers published by St. Joan’s Alliance and the British imperial government in Africa between the years 1937 and 1940. They include publications about all British dependencies and colonies within that period colonial office correspondence documents between the Alliance and imperial administrative officials, and documents from the Archives of St. Joan’s Social and Political Alliance.

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<sup>46</sup> This phrase was used by Barbara Bush in “Feminizing Empire.”

<sup>47</sup> Mr. Chadwick, Colonial Office Correspondence, 1939 CO847/14/11.

<sup>48</sup> Colonial Office Correspondence, 20 January 1940, CO847/14/11.



The importance of the 1937 *White Paper on the Status of Women in West Africa* to this study can also not be overstated as the entire study (as well as correspondence documents used herein) seem to revolve around it. A plethora of secondary sources are also used, and they are equally written by authors on both sides of the empire.

It was not possible at this time to obtain further documents that contain information about the discourse of forced marriages in Africa, or the actions and policies of the British government on it beyond 1940. Additionally, some parts of the 1939 correspondence also seemed to be missing. This posed a problem of fragmentation, but the available documents were adequately analyzed enough to produce a decent narrative of the discourse. It is also noteworthy that no other studies that examine the activities of St Joan's Social and Political Alliance exist, which would have been helpful as a cross-reference of the organization's presence and interest in Africa. Thus, the pioneer nature of this study implies that it could spark further research on the subject.

In addition to that, an important limitation in the sources for this study lies in the complete absence of any evidence that pointed to the course and process of direct contact between African women and British women. A deeper search into the archives of the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance would most likely reveal how such interactions transpired. Having exhausted the intended scope of this study however, this limitation serves as an ideal ground for further study. Apart from adding to the existing knowledge about the colonial interactions and relationships between British women and African women, it will also contribute further to the study of the activities of the Alliance in British colonial Africa.

## CHAPTER 2

### BETWEEN AFRICAN WOMEN AND BRITISH WOMEN: THE ACTIVITIES OF ST JOAN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALLIANCE IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE.

#### *BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GROUP*

The St Joan's Social and Political Alliance was one of the many women activist groups that emerged in turn-of-the-century Britain. It was founded as The Catholic Women Suffrage Society (CWSS) in 1911 by Mary Kendall and Gabrielle Jeffrey. Francis Mason documents the process of its foundation starting from when the two ladies met in 1910 and decided that a group which encourages Catholic women to fight for women's suffrage was necessary. Their efforts led to the founding meeting of the society on 25 March 1911. According to Mason, the basic tenets of the organization at this time was "to band Catholics of both sexes, in order to secure for women, the parliamentary vote on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men."<sup>49</sup> One of the official reasons why the society was founded was that it was to challenge the assertion that the catholic church was opposed to votes for women. This was because many other organizations were in existence to make appeals to various other sections of society – Jews, Anglicans and so on – except Catholics.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the founders of the society were indeed pioneers, as Francis Mason would agree. The society also officially declared to base their agitations for the vote on justice, morality and religion; and its constitution delineates that men may be associates of the society, but not members.<sup>51</sup> The society was founded as a non-party

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<sup>49</sup> Francis Mason, "The Newer Eve: The Catholic Women's Suffrage Society in England, 1911-1923," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 72, no. 4 (Oct. 1986): 621.

<sup>50</sup> Leonora Di Alberti, *The International Woman Suffrage News*, February 1920, 72. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs  
[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_14\\_Issue\\_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943\\_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_14_Issue_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec)

<sup>51</sup> Leonora Di Alberti, *The International Woman Suffrage News*, February 1920, 72. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs  
[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_14\\_Issue\\_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943\\_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_14_Issue_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec).

constitutional organization, which means that it will not partake in the activities of militant suffragists whose tactics were often considered violent.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, the CWSS became one of Britain's longest serving feminist organization, and the longest serving religious suffrage league.<sup>53</sup> It still exists today as the St Joan's International Alliance.<sup>54</sup>

In studying the foundations, principles and activities of the society, the influence of its religious background cannot be overemphasized. Apart from being the pioneer Catholic suffrage organization, it was founded during a period when religious affiliation was a source of legitimacy and authority in British society. And despite the low population of Catholics in Britain at the time, the strong influence of Catholicism was a reality especially in relation to the papacy. Additionally, as Jessica Thurlow affirms, Christian conceptions of family and vocal claims about women's moral and spiritual authority during the period were a powerful influence on feminist beliefs.<sup>55</sup> Thus, apart from being a unique organization due the fact that it wholly self-identifies as feminist, it also represents the growing interest of Catholic women in the "woman question" in Britain at the time, a time when the Catholic church's position on women's societal role revolved around domesticity.<sup>56</sup> The discourse of legitimacy and religious affiliation played out in the early years of the society when it considered the approval of the Holy See as a "triumph." According to the 1920 official article where this reference was made by the organization, "the society met with a considerable amount of opposition and suspicion; but it has broken down opposition and allayed suspicion, and, indeed, has recently had the joy of receiving the approval of the Holy Father."<sup>57</sup> Support from

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<sup>52</sup> Jessica Bronwyn Thurlow, "Continuity and Change in British Feminism, C. 1940-1960" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006), 276.

<sup>53</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change", 261.

<sup>54</sup> Their official website is [www.stjoansinternationalalliance.org](http://www.stjoansinternationalalliance.org).

<sup>55</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 263.

<sup>56</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 272. The 'woman question' is the description given to a series of debates on the position of women in British society from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s. It was the foundation of feminist agitations which became prevalent from the mid-1800s onwards in England.

<sup>57</sup> *The International Woman Suffrage News*, 1 March 1918, 90. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs

[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_14\\_Issue\\_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943\\_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_14_Issue_5-45&pagenum=1&resultNum=4&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943_20935&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec)

prominent Catholic figures such as the archbishop of Edinburgh also helped to ground its presence in the Catholic world of Britain.

The society started off on a successful note. Susan Parnell documents how in its first decade, branches were founded all over England in Hastings, East Sussex, Brighton, Plymouth, Cardiff, Manchester, Oxford, Birmingham and so on.<sup>58</sup> The society was also able to expand from England to Scotland, Wales and Ireland.<sup>59</sup> Up to 1918 when partial suffrage was achieved for women, the society's efforts were mostly towards the suffragist movement; so much so that on Sunday, 17 February 1918, members of the CWSS attended mass at the Westminster Cathedral which, according to an article published in the *Catholic Citizen* was celebrated "as an act of thanksgiving for the passing into law of the Representation of the People Bill, and to beg a blessing on the new electors in the discharge of the duties and responsibilities which they are now called upon to undertake."<sup>60</sup> The period of the first world war from 1914-1918 was however a remarkable period in the early years of the organization. Mason notes how unlike all other suffrage organizations in Britain at this time, the CWSS made sure that the suffragist movement was not relegated in the face of wartime exigencies.<sup>61</sup> Apart from that, wartime allowed the society to establish a more grounded feminist position in the country as it expanded from reacting and influencing suffrage issues to other wider issues that affect women generally.<sup>62</sup> It also founded, in 1915, a journal called *The Catholic Citizen*, and its first editor was Leonora De Alberti.

With the partial enfranchisement of women in 1918, most of the CWSS's branches disbanded. However, the society marched on and continued working towards the extension of the franchise to all women who were 21 years old; and "to establish

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<sup>58</sup> Nancy Stewart Parnell, "A Venture in Faith: A History of the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance formerly the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society, 1911-1961," (London: St. Joan's Alliance), cited in Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 277.

<sup>59</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change," 277.

<sup>60</sup> *The International Woman Suffrage News*, 1 March 1918, 90. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs

[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_12\\_Issue\\_6-39&pagenum=1&resultNum=2&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943\\_20935&backto=RESULTS&fromPage=searchResults](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ledproxy2.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_12_Issue_6-39&pagenum=1&resultNum=2&entries=1000&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631116943_20935&backto=RESULTS&fromPage=searchResults)

<sup>61</sup> Mason, "The Newer Eve," 624.

<sup>62</sup> Mason, "The Newer Eve," 624.

political, social and economic equality between men and women and further the work and usefulness of Catholic women as citizens.”<sup>63</sup> From this period until 1923 when the society changed its name to St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance, Mason contends that three themes dominated the outlook of the Society: its continuing to enunciate a feminist ideology, its advance into the international women’s movement and its unsuccessful attempt to avoid church censure.<sup>64</sup> Remarkable among these was the move towards international affiliation, facilitated by its emergence as the Catholic voice within the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA).<sup>65</sup> The organization however still made remarkable progress in national campaigns such as in married women’s employment and the discourse around birth control and its regulations.<sup>66</sup> Other areas included divorce, equal moral standard, women police, widows’ pensions, guardianship of infants and so on.<sup>67</sup> The CWSS’s venture into international activism was known to have created a rift between the society and the church and it was dropped as an official organization of the Catholic Church, which brought about the urgency of having to change the Society’s name in 1923 to St. Joan’s Social and Political Organization. This was in a bid to drop the label “catholic” from the organization’s title as instructed by the church that “no society calling itself Catholic may take part in or be officially represented at any meetings of a non-confessional, Protestant or neutral nature.”<sup>68</sup> The new name was also adopted in the bid to include the terms “political” and “social” in its new title so as not to limit future

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<sup>63</sup> Thurlow, “Continuity and Change,” 279.

<sup>64</sup> Mason, “The Newer Eve,” 629.

<sup>65</sup> Mason, “The Newer Eve,” 634.

<sup>66</sup> These are discussed in detail in Thurlow, “Continuity and Change.”

<sup>67</sup> *The International Woman Suffrage News*, December 1923, 42. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs

[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_18\\_Issue\\_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216\\_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_18_Issue_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec)

<sup>68</sup> *The International Woman Suffrage News*, December 1923, 42. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs

[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_18\\_Issue\\_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216\\_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_18_Issue_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec)

work.<sup>69</sup> This was officially adopted in an extraordinary meeting on the 20 October 1923.<sup>70</sup>

From here, the Alliance ventured more and more into the international scene, gaining consultative status with the League of Nations and eventually the United Nations. The Alliance did not also stop working with Catholic organizations around the world. In fact, its relationship with the catholic church ultimately improved in the forties and fifties.<sup>71</sup> The Alliance's evolution into an international organization reflects the international outlook of the organization's activities from 1923 onwards, and especially in the years leading up to the Second World War. Through these, activities, the organization also ventured into activism against British imperial policies which will reflect in the discourse around forced marriages in Africa as will be elucidated subsequently.

### ***ST JOAN'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALLIANCE AND THE DISCOURSE AROUND THE FORCED MARRIAGES OF AFRICAN WOMEN***

Two factors about the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance must be brought to the fore when discussing its involvement in the discourse around Forced Marriages in colonial Africa. One of these is the status that it came to attain as an international organization. In the Alliance's *Statement on the Status of Women of Native Races* which was presented to the 18<sup>th</sup> assembly of the League of Nations on 30 May 1937, it affirmed this status in the opening statement thus:

St Joan's Alliance, an organization of Catholic women, stands for political, social and economic equality between men and women of whatever race. In common with **other international women's**

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<sup>69</sup> Mason, "The Newer Eve", 637

<sup>70</sup> *The International Woman Suffrage News*, December 1923, 42. From the Gerritsen collection of Aletta H. Jacobs

[http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103\\_Volume\\_18\\_Issue\\_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216\\_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec](http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com.ezproxy.uwindsor.ca/fulltext/fulltext.do?area=documents&id=Gerritsen-GP103_Volume_18_Issue_3-37&pagenum=1&resultNum=1&entries=933&source=config.cfg&queryId=../session/1631110216_15098&backto=FULLREC&fromPage=fullRec)

<sup>71</sup> Thurlow gave details of this. For example, Florence Barry, who was honorary secretary for 49 years received the highest honor that can be bestowed on a woman by the pope – the Cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* in 1951.

**organizations**, St. Joan's Alliance is of the opinion that the status of women would be raised by the adoption of an International Convention granting to women equality of rights and responsibilities.<sup>72</sup>

Roping in the welfare of African women in its activism, the document goes on thus:

Other international women's organizations are dealing with various aspects of the status of women, St Joan's Alliance has endeavored to obtain information about the status "native" women in different parts of the world, believing that no survey will be complete unless these women, for the most part inarticulate, are included.<sup>73</sup>

Here, one sees the level of authority which the body had garnered on the international level through which it drew legitimacy to be involved in such caliber of activism. This is especially significant given the sore relationship between the alliance and the Catholic church (which was largely its previous avenue of legitimacy) at this time. Additionally, one sees that the organization chose the welfare of Native women as its niche of influence. This creates sufficient ground for the examination of the organization's relations with women in Africa, especially in carrying out the said survey.

Another factor to be considered in the Alliance's involvement in this discourse is the interplay of class and elitism in its activities. According to "Continuity and Change" by Jessica Thurlow, the women of St Joan's Alliance were often highly accomplished women with active careers as government representatives, mayors, welfare workers and writers.<sup>74</sup> This helps to explain the involvement of Eleanor Rathbone, a member of the British parliament and the St. Joan's Alliance in the outset of this long and protracted discourse around forced marriages. Particularly, it explains why the activism of the Alliance was respectably regarded by the imperial government. Rathbone set in motion the long enquiry by the British government into the welfare of African Women and the discussion was kept alive by the activism of other members of the Alliance, as well as the activities of missionaries. In the official narration (extracted from the White Paper of 1938) of the House of Commons incident which took place on 22 July 1936, it was reported thus:

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<sup>72</sup> Extract from League of Nations Document, A. 14.1937.V, 1, CO847/9/5.

<sup>73</sup> Extract from League of Nations Document, A. 14.1937.V, 1, CO847/9/5.

<sup>74</sup> Thurlow, "Continuity and Change", 292.

Miss Rathbone asked the Secretary of State for the Colonies if he is aware that a girl named Kekwe in Tanganyika was recently sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for the manslaughter of the man chosen by her parents to marry her against her will; and whether he will consider promoting a law in Tanganyika, and in other British dependencies in Africa, requiring notice of intending marriage to be given to the tribal authority, who shall register such marriage and prevent it if the girl refuses, or will he take other steps to prevent the forced marriage of other African girls?<sup>75</sup>

In his defense, the Secretary of State for the colonies replied:

I have seen a reference in the press to the case mentioned by the Hon. Member. As regards the general questions involved, I understand that in all British African dependencies, women are free to bring cases of attempted coercion to the notice of the authorities, in which event appropriate steps would be taken. I am asking the Governors of the Dependencies concerned whether the present practice is, in their view, sufficient to prevent abuses, and if not, what further steps they consider might be taken in the matter.<sup>76</sup>

In a colonial office memo of 5 July 1937, it was also noted that

This correspondence arose out of a question asked in the house of commons in July 1936 by Miss Rathbone M.P – the question itself arose out of the trial of an African girl in Tanganyika for manslaughter. the question roused a good deal of interest at the time in certain circles ....<sup>77</sup>

The said trial of Miss Kekwe which Ms. Rathbone asked about played out a month earlier on 18 May 1936 in the British colonial territory of Tanganyika. A young woman of between 17-20 years was convicted of the offence of manslaughter. The young woman, Kekwe, had been forced by her parents to marry a man, Olendo, whom she had no affectionate feelings for. In rebellion, she ran to stay with her lover at his home. Upon finding out, her parents, together with her husband, some of his friends and male family members, went to her lover's house with intentions of forcibly taking her back to live with her husband. Amidst the chaos, she stabbed another man, Ndemfoo, who happened

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<sup>75</sup> Ormsby. W. Gore, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women in Africa* (London: Government Printing Department, 1937), 9, C0847/9/5.

<sup>76</sup> Ormsby. W. Gore, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women*, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Mr. Lee, Colonial Office Correspondence, 7 May 1937, CO847/9/5.



to be a cousin to Olendo, in his chest. The stab was unfortunately fatal and Ndemfoo died from his wound. Although Kekwe claimed to have stabbed Ndemfoo accidentally, the judge who presided over her trial did not agree with that. He was convinced that she had intentionally stabbed Ndemfoo but in the heat of passion caused by sudden provocation. On this account, she was cleared of murder charges and convicted of manslaughter in accordance with section 188 of the Penal Code. When asked if she had anything to say about her sentence, she responded “I have nothing to say.” Three days later, on 21 May, she was sentenced to 15 months imprisonment with hard labor.<sup>78</sup>

Following this incident and Ms. Rathbone’s inquiry, a correspondence was sent out by the then Secretary of State for the colonies to the Governors of all the African colonies (Kenya, Uganda, Nyasaland, Tanganyika Territory, Northern Rhodesia, Nigeria, Gold, Sierra Leone and Gambia) on 17 August 1936 demanding information about forced marriages in their territories. The information demanded was categorized into five points thus:

- a. Whether cases of real coercion (involving perhaps some physical coercion) are at all frequent.
- b. Whether in cases of attempted coercion, women are free to bring such cases to the notice of the district officer or to other appropriate authorities.
- c. What action is normally taken in the event of such complaints being received.
- d. Whether you are satisfied that the present practice is sufficient to prevent serious abuses; and
- e. Whether, if the answer to (d) is in the negative, you consider that other measures (example the compulsory registration of marriages by a tribal or other authority) would be desirable and practicable.<sup>79</sup>

The Alliance’s influence (as much as its sense of importance) is visible in its next course of action following the seemingly satisfactory response which every governor of each colony returned to the colonial office on these enquiries: it assembled a public meeting at Caxton Hall in Westminster on the 12th of December 1938.<sup>80</sup> In the draft

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<sup>78</sup> Judge I.G bates, Criminal Sessions Case No.49 of 1936, May 21, 1936, CO847/9/5.

<sup>79</sup> This enquiry was also printed as part of the *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women in Africa*.

<sup>80</sup> These will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

resolution for the meeting, it was noted that the organization welcomed the government's White Paper relating to the welfare of women in tropical Africa as a serious endeavor to ascertain facts with regards to the fundamental aspect of the welfare of African Women, their freedom or servitude in marriage. However, it finds that it can only be regarded as a preliminary to further investigation and action. Citing the French colonial legislation of June 15, 1939, against forced marriages in its West African and Equatorial African colonies, the Alliance suggested that an ordinance be enacted in each British dependency with the following provisions:

1. No contract of marriage or betrothal should be made for any girl under 14 years of age
2. No contract should be made for a girl over 14 years of age without her consent
3. Any person who coerces any girl or woman to enter a marriage union against her will shall be guilty of an offence.
4. No contract arising out of a forced marriage shall be enforceable under any law.<sup>81</sup>

This action by the Alliance proved very effective because it dangerously tapped into the rivalry by the colonial powers at the time. In another office memo, it was stated that the British "seemed to be open to reproach that in this matter, we [the British] are less progressive than the French."<sup>82</sup> This discloses the theme of empire as a performance, which is especially concealed in the idea of the civilizing mission. Producing an image of a British empire that cared about the welfare of its subjects was important, and probably influenced the exaggeration of tales of African savagery.

At the actual meeting, nevertheless, the above suggestions were discussed by members of the Alliance who spoke at great length and detail on the issue of forced marriages in Africa. Speakers included Ms. Vera Laughton-Matthews, Ms. Eleanor Rathbone, Ms. Nina Boyle, Archdeacon Owen of Kavirondo and so on. This meeting was

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from Florence Barry of St. Joan's social and Political Alliance to Rt. Hon. Malcolm McDonald, MP (Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs), November 23, 1939. The French legislation was the "Order of 21 June 1939, Promulgating in French West Africa the Decree of 5 June 1939, Regulating Native Marriages in French West Africa and in French Equatorial Africa", *Official Journal for French West Africa*, no. 1837, dated 24 June 1939, CO847/11/14.

<sup>82</sup> Colonial Office Correspondence, 8 January 1940, CO847/11/14.

supported by 18 other organizations, and it was agreed that a deputation be sent to the Secretary of State for the colonies' office to discuss those resolutions with him.<sup>83</sup>

The deputation was received by Lord Dufferin, the parliamentary undersecretary of state for the colonies on behalf of the Secretary of State on 10 January 1939 and in attendance were Lord Dufferin, Mr. Dawe, Mr. O.G.R. Williams, Mr. Boyd, Mr. Foreston, Mr. Eastwood and Mr. Chadwick for the colonial office and Archdeacon Owen, Mrs. Laughton-Matthews, Miss Barry, Miss Challoner, Miss Spender and Miss Hawarden for the Alliance. Here, the Alliance presented the resolution from the 12 December meeting and made more appeal to the office, while also presenting more evidence on the practice of forced marriages in Africa, to carry out further investigation on the subject to facilitate adequate legislation. Lord Dufferin in reply, and among several other things, said that he was inclined to be opposed to legislation which would be most difficult to put into practice in the face of native customs.<sup>84</sup>

Further tenacity was displayed by the alliance in countless letters sent to the Secretary of State's office. In regard to the above meeting for example, the Alliance followed up in a letter sent to the office on 27 January 1939, reiterating, among other issues, that the resolution from the public meeting be enacted and that although it was pleased that the colonial office was taking some steps towards raising the standard of education for African women, the Alliance also felt that the slow-moving effects of increased education (although of primary importance) were not sufficient to deal with the matter of urgency.<sup>85</sup>

The Statement which the Alliance Presented to the League of Nations in May 1937 also disclosed the extent to which the group went in inquiring about the welfare of indigenous women around the British Empire. The document showed that extensive

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<sup>83</sup> These include the Actresses' Franchise League, Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, British Commonwealth League, Catholic Social Guild, Dames of St. Joan, Married Women's Association, Mothers' Union, National Council for Equal Citizenship, National Council of Women, National Sisterhood Movement, National Union of Women Teachers, Open Door Council, Six Point Group, Suffragette Fellowship, Women's Freedom League, Women's Guild of Empire Ltd., Women's International League for Peace and Freedom British Section) and Women's Liberal Federation.

<sup>84</sup> Minutes of a meeting held in the colonial office on Tuesday, 10 January 1939, between representatives of the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, CO847/11/14.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Florence Barry of St. Joan's social and Political Alliance to Rt. Hon. Malcolm McDonald, MP (Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs), 27 January 1929, CO847/9/5.

surveys were carried out in African colonies, Australia, the Union of South Africa, Laos (then known as French Indochina), and British Guiana on the welfare of women in those places. The themes covered were education, paid work, consent, marriage, child marriage, coercion, Bride price, polygamy, registration of marriages, position of widows, inheritance, and prostitution. On each of these themes, the group gave detailed information and proffered recommendations as well.<sup>86</sup> Such vested interest in the native women constitutes an interesting pattern of interaction in the colonial hierarchy.

***THE COMPLICITY OF MISSIONARY PERSONNEL IN THE DISCOURSE  
AROUND FORCED MARRIAGES OF AFRICAN WOMEN.***

Perhaps due to a similarity in philosophical foundations, the St. Joan's Alliance usually found allies among missionaries working in Africa. Indeed, several studies have explored an alternative perspective about the role of missions and missionaries in the British empire, which is different from the prevalent one that is vocal about how missionaries were the pawns and foot soldiers of imperialism. Most of these come from the perspective of the missionary as supporting "humanitarian imperialism" or philanthropy towards indigenous peoples, instead of the militant tactics of administrators. This has usually brought about frictions between missionaries and the administrative branch of the empire.<sup>87</sup> The missionary idea of Africans as "lost souls" who had to be saved through empathy and Christ-like humanitarianism did not usually sit well with the administrative practice of pacification and aggressive economic exploitation. Missionary frustration at these actions thus seemed to find an outlet in women's activism naturally. Consequently, the success of the St. Joan's Alliance's activism was largely influenced by the support it got from missionaries in Africa. Such missionary-administrator conflict is visible in this discourse as well. Mr. Chadwick of the colonial office on Downing Street wrote on 28 November 1939 thus:

I think that Archdeacon Owen fails to realize that the gospel, carried as a burning light into the wilderness, will not purge the heathen by fire in the

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<sup>86</sup> Extract from League of Nations Document, A. 14.1937.V, CO847/9/5.

<sup>87</sup> One of such studies is the volume titled *Mission and Empire*, edited by Norman Etherington (Oxford University Press, 2005). Alan Lester's chapter titled "Humanitarians and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century" discusses this in detail.

space of a few short years. The whole question of forced marriage must be bound up with our policy of educating the native, and I fail to see that any written contract such as is suggested by the Alliance can help until the African mind has been kneaded into another form.<sup>88</sup>

Archdeacon W.E Owen was a prominent missionary figure in this episode. He worked with the Church Missionary Society and was made Archdeacon of Kavirondo in the colony of Kenya in 1918. Beyond Ms. Rathbone's House of Commons enquiry, Owen was the primary trigger of this enquiry into the welfare of African women. This was because of a letter which he wrote to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1936 titled "Reluctant Girls Paid for in Goats," from which Ms. Rathbone obtained her reference. In the letter, he makes Kekwe's trial public and gives some details on the practice of forced marriages in his province. Owen, together with his wife also went on to exert great influence on the correspondence between the St Joan's Alliance and the colonial office. He granted many interviews in Britain where he talked about forced marriages in Africa and was also present at every meeting of the Alliance where that subject was discussed.

In addition to, and probably with the influence of Archbishop Owen, other missionaries that were working in Africa were in constant alliance with St Joan's group. This was evident in the fact that the representatives of St. Joan's Alliance always contested the accuracy of the information given in the White Paper relating to the welfare of African women (as well as any information given by the colonial office on their plans to alleviate the welfare of African women) because the opinion of local missionaries would controvert some of the statements made by the colonial office. Throughout the time of this episode, the Alliance constantly received letters from individual missionaries, sometimes anonymously, which gave accounts of instances of forced marriages which they encountered while working in African colonies. The details of these accounts were usually disturbing and were all forwarded to the colonial office by the Alliance. Most of the evidence which the alliance used to arm themselves against the colonial government were therefore, provided by the agency of missionaries in the empire. This re-employs

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<sup>88</sup> Mr. Chadwick, Colonial Office Correspondence, November 28, 1939, CO847/14/11.

the idea of missionary personnel as being in opposition to empire and helps one to appreciate the complex nature of the British Empire.

The significance of the foregoing lies in the idea that the St. Joan's Alliance was bent on agitating for the welfare of native women and went about it in the most convenient way that it thought possible. Unfortunately, the process of direct contact and interaction was not documented in this study, although it certainly appears to be minimal. The evidence, process, consequences and perceptions of direct contact between both groups of women must, therefore, be further examined in future studies as it promises to bring forth new and interesting evidence in the study of relations between British women and African women. Nevertheless, even the existing evidence shows that the St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance proved to be a formidable source of pressure for the imperial government mostly through its status as an international body that was recognized by the League of Nations, as well as the persuasive tactics that it employed – which included the invocation of colonial super-power rivalry. Enlisting the help of missionary personnel, especially the reputable Archdeacon Owen, was also helpful. Indeed, the involvement of reputable personalities such as Eleanor Rathbone and Owen of Kavirondo in the activist side of the episode can be said to have contributed significantly to the favorable consideration which its agitations gained within the hierarchy of the imperial government.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**BETWEEN AFRICAN WOMEN AND THE COLONIAL STATE**

***THE RESPONSE OF THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT TO THE  
DISCOURSE ON THE FORCED MARRIAGES OF AFRICAN WOMEN.***

*In Fact, native women in Africa generally have far more freedom than is  
apparent at first.*

*J.S.O Hood, Office of the Secretary of State  
for the Colonies, 8 May 1937.*

This chapter aims to examine the actions which the British imperial government took towards addressing the issue of forced marriage in Africa through the influence of St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance and their missionary friends. It shows how the discourse was framed in official circles. Importantly, it also features the ambivalence between the complicity of British-initiated "native law", and that of the pre-colonial customary law in sustaining this practice, or as a militating factor in said sustenance.<sup>89</sup> Essentially, readers will, through the perspective of this discourse, get a glimpse of the experiences of African women under British colonial rule, as well as get an idea of how they interacted with the colonial state.

This discussion will begin from the earlier-mentioned dispatch which the Secretary of State sent out to the governors of the British dominions in Africa on 17 August 1936. To those enquiries, the governors of the colonies replied thus:

The governor of Northern Rhodesia replied on 9 October 1936, that "now that slavery has been abolished, African girls are seldom married against their will."<sup>90</sup> In the case of force being employed, he noted that the girl would not hesitate nowadays to appeal to the Native Authority, or, if necessary, the District Officer, and in such cases, the marriage will be disallowed. He was quite satisfied that the practices in place were sufficient to prevent serious abuses and that the fact that girls were becoming too independent was becoming a cause for anxiety among Africans. He indicated that he was

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<sup>89</sup> These terms were used interchangeable in the original discourse. But for in this study, "native" will pertain to colonial or British-initiated practices while "customary" or "indigenous" will refer to pre-colonial practices.

<sup>90</sup> Ormsby. W. Gore, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women in Africa* (London: Government Printing Department, 1937), 11, CO847/9/5.

awaiting responses to an inquiry about the voluntary registration of African marriages. This proposed registration was intended to tighten the marriage tie however, as against the prevention of forced marriages altogether.

In Gambia, the governor posited that though it cannot be denied that cases of coercion do occur, it is difficult to estimate the extent of the practice as the instances in which coercion is employed are not always brought to light. However, if the girl has the strength of will to continue her resistance, she is free to lay her complaint before the commissioner of the province or the Native authority. If her accusations are sufficiently proved to be true the marriage can be forbidden and charges of assault or abduction brought to the assailants. He however adds that the customary marriage laws are to blame for the fact that laying complaints to the Native Authorities did not always prevent serious abuse. Ultimately, no change in procedure or legislation will remove these hardships.<sup>91</sup>

The governor of Sierra Leone also noted, upon advice by the Provincial Commissioners, that no instances of real coercion are known in his country. If women were coerced, they would undoubtedly be free to complain to the District Commissioner if they obtained no satisfaction from the paramount chief. However, no such complaints were received; thus, (c), (d) and (e) did not usually arise.<sup>92</sup>

According to the governor of Uganda, “cases of real coercion are very infrequent in Uganda.” The occasional cases usually appear in highly civilized communities and are taken seriously by the Native Authorities and women are free to bring complaints of this nature to the tribal authorities. He admitted to being satisfied that the existing legislation and practice, as well as the weight of public opinion, do provide efficient remedy for such abuses. He did point out that the problem was really the breakdown of traditional moral restraints and the spread of prostitution. Thus, while the tribal customs in relation to marriage produced an occasional abuse or injustice, anything which tended to weaken it may result in a far worse evil – which is the evil of excessive license to African women.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ormsby. W. Gore, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women*, 12-14.

<sup>92</sup> Ormsby. W. Gore, *Correspondence Relating to the Welfare of Women*, 14-15.

<sup>93</sup> From the governor of Uganda, Government House, Uganda to the secretary of State for the colonies, 3 December 1936 CO847/9/5.



In the case of the Gold Coast (Ghana), it was said that after careful enquiry had been made on the subject, it was found that cases of real coercion were not considered to be at all frequent, in cases of attempted coercion, women were free to bring such cases to the notice of the district commissioners and such a right is freely exercised, forced marriages are contrary to native custom, and averse to public opinion. Consequently, the present practices are sufficient to prevent serious abuses.<sup>94</sup>

The governor of Nyasaland noted that the customary marriage customs differed, depending on if the tribe was matrilineal or patrilineal. In the former, there was the absence of bride wealth, and the consent of the girl was required. Although she was sometimes advised as to the eligibility of a suitor, it was certain that she will not agree to marry him if she wanted another. He indicated that while bride wealth was passed to the girl's families in patrilineal societies, cases of coercion were just as infrequent. He also pointed out that the practice of inheriting widows was intended to ensure the future security of the widows. Conclusively, cases of physical coercion did not occur and in the extremely remote chance that it does, a girl will not hesitate to complain to the village headman or Native Authority. Such accusations were taken seriously, thus the question of alternate legislations did not arise, nor was the compulsory registration of marriages necessary.<sup>95</sup>

In Kenya, the presence, or not, of real coercion was said to be conditional upon whether the tribe was still at the primitive stages of development or if tribal customs have been broken down. Among the former, coercion is produced by the pressure of established practice while among the latter, such coercion is rare. In some tribes, a woman is expected to show some reluctance to her future husband as a sign of her respectability. Thus, spectacles of coercion in that instance could be solely intended for theatrics. Having talked a bit about matrilineal and coastal tribes as well, the governor then notes that the weight of public opinion and parental restraint causes girls not to bring cases of coercion to the notice of Native administrators. Such cases are taken seriously and brought before a Native Tribunal. He concludes by stating that the existing

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<sup>94</sup>From the governor of the Gold Coast to the Secretary of State for the colonies, 20 December 1936, CO847/9/5.

<sup>95</sup> From the governor of Nyasaland to the Secretary of State for Colonies, 17 December 1936, CO847/9/5.

customary practices of natives makes it hard to completely prevent cases of coercion but in proposing legislation, care must be taken not to rush things in order not to break down those customary practices. Besides, some Native Councils have already passed resolutions with the view of making the registration of marriages compulsory. It should be noted that the governor noted the Kavirondo district (the same district withing Archdeacon Owen's jurisdiction) as one of the areas where the practice of coercion was now rare.<sup>96</sup>

Coercion according to the governor of Tanganyika was said to be largely moral and based off of public opinion and persuasion, rather than physical force. Besides, parents knew that when their daughters eloped to avoid a forced marriage, they would have to return the bride price. Most parents dreaded this and would rather that it did not happen. Women were also said to be free to report such matters to the Native Authorities, who might grant them divorce or punish the offending party if real coercion is proved. Finally, the compulsory registration of marriages by Native Administrations would be of little effect since the registration will only take place after the marriage was consummated.<sup>97</sup>

With information from a comprehensive survey from different parts of this colony, the governor of Nigeria reiterated that coercion was now becoming infrequent and that the weakness of parental control over women calls for more anxiety. In the Muslim areas, the law permits coercion by a parent and not a guardian, and annulment is always possible previous to consummation. Furthermore, a girl who was betrothed (even from childhood) was customarily allowed to pay visits to her proposed husband's family before marriage, which gives her a chance to estimate his character and decide if she wants him or not. Parents are usually compelled to bend to her wishes because of the fear of returning her bride price should she desert him in future. Ultimately, the choice of reporting coercion to Native Authorities was always open and freely exercised. The governor expressed confidence that the present practice is sufficient to prevent serious

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<sup>96</sup> From the governor of Kenya to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 31 December 1936, CO847/9/5.

<sup>97</sup> From the governor of Tanganyika to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 February 1937 CO847/9/5.

abuses and that voluntary registration of marriages was a more favorable option than compulsory registration due to considerations of public opinion.<sup>98</sup>

### ***CRITICISMS OF THE 1938 WHITE PAPER***

As can be seen from the above series of discussions, the general consensus in official circles was that women were beginning to enjoy more autonomy as far as the issue of forced marriages is concerned, that such cases were becoming less and less frequent (though not totally non-existent), and that African women had a guarantee of protection should they report such cases to official authorities. In a July 9, 1937, dispatch from the Downing Street office of the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Mr. Ormsby Gore added thus: “it is clear that any real and lasting advance in this matter must necessarily be a slow process of education and enlightenment.”<sup>99</sup> In that light, he was “satisfied, as a result of studying this correspondence, that the general situation is not one which needs give rise to undue anxiety or call for any special action on the part of the colonial government.”<sup>100</sup>

Criticisms of the White Paper came from both the St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance and other Missionaries. That of the Alliance has been noted in the previous section, so the criticism of Missionaries, especially Archdeacon Owen of Kavirondo will be touched on briefly. The Archdeacon criticized the general consensus of the inquiry which is that cases of coercion were either non-existent or quite infrequent on the grounds that he personally knew (through his work and experiences in Africa) that such cases existed. He quoted cases from all nine colonies that contradicted the official report, and in the case of Kenya for example, he states that some African elders whom he had acquainted himself with put the estimate of number of conversions at 500 per year or roughly ten a week.<sup>101</sup> In Tanganyika, he counters the governor’s opinion that a majority of the youth population was now Christian, saying that it was really only one fifth of

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<sup>98</sup> From the governor of Nigeria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 27 February 1937, CO847/9/5.

<sup>99</sup> Dispatch from the Secretary of State for the colonies to the Officers Administering the Government of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria, 9 July 1937, CO847/9/5.

<sup>100</sup> This statement is contained in the original office correspondence but was excluded from the published version of the White Paper for some reason.

<sup>101</sup> W.E Owen, “Forced Marriages in Africa: Recent White Paper Criticized”, *Manchester Guardian*, 27 July 1938, CO847/11/12.

them; and more so, Christians are not usually inclined to save pagan girls. He also discredited the claims by the governors that such cases were usually taken seriously by the Native Authorities by stating that if that was the case, then there would be no cases of coercion. He then decries the imperial government's concern for public opinion/the breakdown of customary practices by adding that the government must be willing to make policies that go against mass public opinion (just as they do in economic matters) if any real progress must be made in the issue.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, he points out that if the official statements were wrong, there was, in fact, a case for reopening the whole matter.<sup>103</sup>

The most scathing criticism of the 1938/9 White Paper came from the fact that the opinions of missionaries were excluded from the entire report. The Archdeacon asked, "Were the governors apprehensive of what the missionaries will say?"<sup>104</sup> Given the proximity of missionaries to indigenous people and their ways of life, it was necessary that their opinions be included. This narrative was equally supported by the St Joan's Alliance and what is most incriminating about it is that individual missionaries kept sending proofs of case after case of coercion which they encountered in the course of their work. In this light, the imperial government did open up further inquiry to the colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone with the aim of finding out the opinions of mission leaders on the matter.

In the episode so far, it is deductible that the Imperial government was downplaying the severity of forced marriages in Africa, as official narratives were usually on the positive side of the argument. The reasons for this are unclear. It is possible that the imperial government did not appreciate the meddling of the women's group in colonial administrative affairs, or it was trying to maintain a positive public image of the administration while maintaining the hold on African colonies. Nevertheless, the scheduling of public meetings by the Alliance as well as the publication

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<sup>102</sup> W.E Owen, "Forced Marriages in Africa: Recent White Paper Criticized", *Manchester Guardian*, 27 July 1938, CO847/11/12.

<sup>103</sup> CMD 5784. Archdeacon Owen also criticized the white on the grounds that the governor of Togoland's report was not included in the report. He was however not aware that the Northern and Southern section of Togoland was administered as part of the Gold Coast Protectorate and Colony respectively.

<sup>104</sup> W.E Owen, "Forced Marriages in Africa: Recent White Paper Criticized", 1 July 1938, CO847/11/12.

of critical articles in Newspapers back in Britain was apparently aimed to attract the interest of the British public towards this discourse.

In Sierra Leone, the authorities consulted include the head of the Catholic Mission, the general superintendent of the American Wesleyan Mission, the head of the Methodist Missionary Society, the Superintendent of the United Brethren Mission and the Bishop of Sierra Leone. In the Gold Coast, the Archbishop of Sekondi was contacted, as well as the Roman Catholic Bishop of Cape Coast, and the General Superintendent of the Methodist Missionary Society, Gold Coast. The information which these Heads of Missions provided was not much different from the ones given in the previous enquiry. They all opined that cases of coercion were either unheard of, non-existent or infrequent. They also all agreed to the prevalence of moral persuasion as against physical coercion.

In Nigeria, the governor maintained that the previous information which he gave was based on exhaustive investigations throughout Nigeria by residents and that if the Alliance can provide concrete evidence to work with, he would welcome the opportunity of referring the matter to heads of Missions in Nigeria. he was also certain that references to Native Court records would show convincing proof that the coerced can readily obtain relief.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, the imperial government received the report of one Miss M. J. Field, who was a government sociologist in the Gold Coast, which stated that forced marriages were not part of customary practices among the tribes which she studied, and that they are ruled out not only by the customary procedure in arranging marriages by general social sentiments, as well as the fact that the husband of a recalcitrant wife is liable to “lose face” among his peers. Miss Field’s report also pointed out the difference between forced marriage and arranged marriages, with the addendum that an arranged marriage did not necessarily translate to an unwilling bride.<sup>106</sup>

The back-and-forth debate on the issue of forced marriages between the imperial government, the St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance and missionaries from this point seemed to go from one impasse to the other as has been seen from the foregoing. It should however be noted that the discourse which has been featured here is

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<sup>105</sup> Colonial Office Correspondence, 1 February 1940, CO847/14/11.

<sup>106</sup> Miss M.J Field, “Memorandum on the Alleged Forced Marriages in the Gold Coast”, 6 October 1939, CO847/14/11.

characteristically top-down, as it does not go into great detail about what was going on in the individual colonies and the many regions and tribes therein. It might be deduced, therefore, that if any changes in policy and administration regarding the welfare of women could have been affected, they would have been within the colonies themselves. This calls for further and extensive study as the primary aim of this study is to examine this particular discourse. From here, the select colonies of Kenya, Nigeria and the Gold Coast will be further examined by juxtaposing the official reports of the imperial government on the state of forced marriages in those colonies with the reports of select secondary studies that deal with marriages in the same time period in these colonies. Kenya, Nigeria and the Gold Coast were selected because they seemed to generate the most attention within the discourse.

### ***COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON THE DISCOURSE AROUND FORCED MARRIAGES***

#### ***The Gold Coast (Ghana)***

Sean Hawkins' "The Woman in Question: Marriage and Identity in the Colonial Courts of Northern Ghana 1907-1954" examines the ways that colonial courts attempted to reshape the social identities of LoDagaa women in Northern Ghana between 1907 and 1954, and in so doing eroded aspects of the women's freedom.<sup>107</sup> Hawkins identifies that there was an "ambivalence" in colonial attitudes towards women's freedom, as well as a gap between the rhetoric of court proceedings and the actions of the women. He also finds that litigations that were brought before colonial courts addressed relationships between men and women almost always to the advantage of the men.<sup>108</sup> One reason for this was the bid to protect the interest of migrant workers, whose activities were central to the colonial enterprise. Hawkins also noted that there was an imposition of western ideas of marriage and divorce on Ghanaian men and women without an attempt to understand the customary dynamics of these arrangements or if their attitudes these can be measured

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<sup>107</sup> Sean Hawkins, "The woman in question: Marriage and Identity in the Colonial Courts of Northern Ghana, 1907-1954," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>108</sup> Sean Hawkins, "The woman in question," 119.

with the western ones. Summarily, the findings of this study implies that when there was a forced marriage, the colonial courts usually maneuvered justice in favor of the men against the women.

“Marrying and Marriage on a Shifting Terrain: Reconfigurations of Power and Authority in Early Colonial Asante” by Victoria B. Tashjian and Jean Allman, on the other hand, implicates British colonialism in the erosion of African women’s freedoms by examining how the rise of cocoa as an important cash crop in Ghana caused the status of women to deteriorate as their labor burdens grew heavier during cocoa’s expansion. Because of cocoa, husbands began to make increased demands upon the productive labor of their wives.<sup>109</sup> Prior to this, marital relationships were said to feature “conjugal labor” which was distinguished by a huge degree of reciprocity between both genders.<sup>110</sup> This study also noted that there was a misunderstanding of native marriages, particularly resulting in the equation of the payment of bride price with purchase.

“Rounding up spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante” by Jean Allman brought attention to the practice of rounding up and arresting unmarried women in Asante. When this was done, the only thing that could guarantee the woman’s freedom was if she named a man whom she will agree to marry. The man would come and pay for her release, and this payment was usually considered an act of marriage.<sup>111</sup> It is interesting that there was no written evidence of this practice in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (as noted by the author), and this implies that the practice was connected to the advent of British colonialism and engendered by the growing prominence of cash and cocoa in indigenous life.<sup>112</sup>

The cases that were studied in the above studies were not as forceful as those being advocated against by the St Joan’s Social and Political Alliance. Importantly, the women were usually free to leave the men if they chose. It is surprising, however, that this practice was not mentioned anywhere in the colonial office’s correspondence with

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<sup>109</sup> Victoria B. Tashjian and Jean Allman, “Marrying and Marriage on a Shifting Terrain” Reconfigurations of Power and Authority in Early Colonial Asante,” in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 238.

<sup>110</sup> Tashjian and Allman, “Marrying and Marriage,” 243.

<sup>111</sup> Jean Allman, “Rounding up spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante,” in *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, ed. Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001), 132.

<sup>112</sup> Jean Allman, “Rounding up spinsters,” 133.

the Gold Coast's governor, especially in light of the fact that there was a great degree of official correspondence on the matter in the colony.

### *Nigeria*

Judith Byfield's "Women, Marriage, Divorce and the Emerging Colonial State in Abeokuta (Nigeria) 1892-1904" shows that women did have a considerable degree of autonomy in marriage matters during the period.<sup>113</sup> The chapter examines a number of marital disputes and divorce cases brought before the British Railway commission in Abeokuta and how women's efforts to engage the railway commissioners in marital disputes illuminates the ways that gender conflicts was woven into the fabric of state formation.<sup>114</sup> Generally, the study disclosed that both men and women were free to leave a marriage usually on the grounds of adultery husband's relative, kleptomania, repeated insolvency, impotence, a husband's habitual laziness or drunkenness, infectious diseases and cruelty.<sup>115</sup> The study also showed how freely women exercised the right to report cases of coercion to the Native Authorities.<sup>116</sup> Also, colonial officials in this region did not hinder women's efforts to renegotiate marriages.<sup>117</sup> One of the reasons for this was to eliminate "female husbands." This concept of female husbands was not fully elaborated, or it could have elucidated the complexity of marriage relations in that part of Africa as well. The study however notes that this freedom was not a ground for gender equality as British officials eroded women's pre-colonial avenues to power. Masculinity became a more legitimate criterion for power.<sup>118</sup>

Andrea Cornwall's "Wayward Women and Useless Men: Contest and Change in Gender Relations in Ado-Odo, Southwestern Nigeria" features the brief memoir of a woman who recalled that in the "olden days" (a time which corresponded to the timeline of this study), women were pressured into marrying husbands that were not of their choosing. For example, a girl could be told by her father "go and plait your hair, you're

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<sup>113</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce and the Emerging Colonial State in Abeokuta, 1892-1904," in *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, ed. Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001).

<sup>114</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce," 29.

<sup>115</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce," 31.

<sup>116</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce," 36.

<sup>117</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce," 40.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Byfield, "Women, Marriage, Divorce," 41.



going to your husband tomorrow.” Markedly, this did not mean that the woman always ended up hating the man but most women who found themselves in this situation could not reject it as she had no power and could not disobey her parents.<sup>119</sup> This is a good example of the idea that moral suasion or public opinion usually superseded physical coercion in the discourse of forced marriages.

While these studies do not cover the whole colony, they corroborate, to a large extent, the Nigerian governor’s reports. Additionally, apart from the Moslem-practicing areas of Northern Nigeria which were mentioned in the foregoing discourse, the practice in Southwestern and Eastern Nigeria was usually the same.

### *Kenya*

Tabitha Kanogo’s study features a narration of how Kenyan women navigated colonial rule. It also shows that colonial legislations sometimes worked in favor of Kenyan women.<sup>120</sup> Its first chapter on women’s legal and cultural status which covers the period of 1910 to 1930 details the colonial administration’s attempt to codify women’s status under customary law. Kanogo argues that the colonial state’s interventions in inventing customary law and creating an embryonic colonial legal system opened spaces in which women seeking to leave undesirable marriages could successfully petition, thereby opening new avenues for women’s self-assertion.<sup>121</sup> He however notes that these were generally geared towards regulating women’s lives. Additionally, he examines how the Native authorities navigated the opposition of a local patriarchy (and also the women themselves, in some case) in their attempts to pass legislations that affected the lives of women. In this way, legislations that were passed were sometimes contradictory.<sup>122</sup>

In the above discourse, it is not sufficient to examine the extent of truism or falsehood in the claims of both the imperial government and the pressure groups. Given

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<sup>119</sup> Andrea Cornwall, “Wayward Women and Useless Mean: Contest and Change in Gender Relations in Ado-Odo, Southwestern Nigeria,” in *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, ed. Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001), 71.

<sup>120</sup> Tabitha, Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900-1950* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2005).

<sup>121</sup> Rachel Jean-Baptiste, “Kanogo, Tabitha – *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900-1950*,” *Cahiers d’études Africaines*, 187-188 (2007): 785.

<sup>122</sup> Rachel Jean-Baptiste, “Kanogo, Tabitha,” 239.

the nature of the discourse, one is exposed to the overbearing influence of the imperial government in stirring narratives, as well as the tendency of the pressure groups to provide greater details in their activism. Ultimately, the system embodies a series of contradictions which involved the presence of coercion in some parts of Africa and the prevalence of greater progressivism in other parts. However, attention must be brought to the fact that indigenous/customary conceptions of gender relations were not sufficiently understood by both the imperialists and their opposition; and this reconfigures the attempts of the activists in the same light as the imperialistic incursion of the administrators. The friction between native and customary practices is also evident, particularly the anxiety towards the erosion of customary values. This exposes the fact the British empire used every tool at its disposal to support its interests in the colonies. In summary, this discourse discloses the complicated nature of the British empire.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From the above discussions, the questions which arise go beyond the issue of why the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, and their missionary friends like Archdeacon Owen of Kavirondo, went to great lengths to protect the rights and welfare of African women during this period. This study is interested in whether or not those extraordinary acts of goodwill reinforced the subjugating nature of the colonial machine, even though they questioned colonial policies.

The St Joan's Social and Political Alliance always emphasized how the subjugation of women in Africa and other colonies threatened the freedom of women in the free world especially Britain; a freedom that took a lot of difficulty to gain (albeit partially) in the first place. Thus, the Alliance considered it important that *their fellow women* in the colonies enjoyed adequate good welfare.<sup>123</sup> However, in detecting the underside of such advocacy, Jessica Thurlow puts it aptly: "they reveal an assumed hierarchy between colonizer and colonized, and they often sensationalized the 'immoral' lives of Africans and emphasized a perceived lack of (Christian) values within the culture."<sup>124</sup> It is also apparent from the above enquiry that there was limited direct contact or investigation between the members of the Alliance and African women (mostly due to the middleman nature of missionary intervention in the matter). This begs the question of whether or not the British feminists were interested in providing a rooted solution to the issue of welfare among African Women. This action proves to be a repetition of the imperial apparatus which restructured the African society without adequately understanding it. However, this study would argue that such a superiority complex on the part of western women helped them to navigate the issue of racial discrimination in advocating for African subject.

On the other hand, Archdeacon Owen (with a reputation of challenging colonial policies which he considered too hard on Africans) was usually at par with the settler community in East Africa. Yet, he was described by Nancy Murray as an embodiment of

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<sup>123</sup> As was stated in the Alliance's statement on the status of the women of native races which was presented to the League of Nations on 30 May 1937.

<sup>124</sup> Jessica Bronwyn Thurlow, "Continuity and Change in British Feminism, C. 1940-1960" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006), 335

contradictions who claimed more than once that “no missionary has done more than I have to defend the settler community.”<sup>125</sup> Thus, he appeared sometimes to be “an ideal Britisher in affording a safety valve to the best light as lover of justice and fair play, constructively obviating sedition among her subjects.”<sup>126</sup> He also reinforced the hierarchical dynamic of the colonial apparatus by virtue of his idea that Africans were “souls that needed to be saved.”<sup>127</sup>

While a lot of studies have examined the various ways in which African women displayed agency in a seemingly oppressive colonial system, this study shows how the British colonial machine was strengthened and reinforced by seemingly subversive activities by British activists. For one, these activities helped to maintain the superior image which the colonizers created for themselves by presenting them as constituting some progressive elements who cared about the civilization and progress of their subjects. The British government’s acquiescence to such activism also reinforced that image. The failure to understand the core customary conceptions of the issues in question – marriage, divorce and bride wealth – also betrays some lack of meticulousness in alleviating the native’s welfare. Additionally, the secondary sources that were examined showed that the government was not trying to downplay the situation in all cases. While the issue of forced marriages was worse in some areas such as Uganda and Kenya, women in other colonies like Nigeria did enjoy some measure of autonomy in marriage.

While it was not discussed as much in this study, the African custom of paying bride wealth was quite central in this discourse, as the issue of forced marriage was considered to be closely related to that custom. For example, in situations where the parents of the girl had already received the bride wealth on her behalf (usually when she was very young), they would have no option but to force her into marriage with such a man who paid that bride wealth. British policies around the payment of bride wealth in its African colonies or the regulation of that custom calls for some scholarly attention. Additionally, this study acknowledges the centrality of the St. Joan’s recommendation for the education of African women, as well as the appointment of women in key positions to

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<sup>125</sup> Nancy Murray, “Archdeacon W.E Owen: Missionary as Propagandist,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14, no. 4 (1982): 653.

<sup>126</sup> Nancy Murray, “Archdeacon W.E Owen,” 654.

<sup>127</sup> Nancy Murray, “Archdeacon W.E Owen,” 667.

oversee the education of African girls, in order that they will be empowered enough to escape the shackles of forced marriage

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