

CULTURE SHAPING GENDER INEQUALITIES: A TRAVERSE THROUGH ADICHIE'S WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINIST

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the mouthpiece of stern, relentless, unapologetic feminism narrates her own experiences to voice against gender inequalities and other stereotypes associated with feminism. Adichie earned her reputation not just on the African landscape but on a global parlance through her brilliant articulate works which includes novels, short stories and non-fiction. Through using strong female characters, she wanted to expose the patriarchal evils in the society. Adichie has confronted the harsh realities of gender inequalities in her childhood itself which reinforced feministic thoughts within her and encouraged her to embrace her true self making her unapologetic for her femininity. Her 2012 ted talk, as well as the book-length essay, later adapted with same title, *We Should all be Feminists* clearly states the need to root out the gender disparity between men and women that exists even today. Women and men are biologically different, so how is it possible to treat them equally, is the simplest condemnation against feminism, to which Adichie undoubtedly points on the true meaning of feminism and explains how empowerment of women actually is an achievement for society. She speaks out that feminism intends only to provide equal opportunities for both men and women and does not challenge the paths of men. In her view, not only women but men should also come out of the cage of gender roles in which they are groomed from the very beginning. She points out how changes happen around us. Developments occur on all walks of life except in the mentality of people. Thus, gender discrimination has become natural and normal, accepted and followed as it is. Adichie even encourages both men and women to equally work together for success in all walks of life. She says "My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better. All of us, women and men, must do better." (48- *We Should All Be Feminist*).

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Inequalities, Stereotypes, Culture, Patriarchy.

"Feminism is of course, part of human rights in general but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender." (41- *We Should All Be Feminist*) These words speak volume on how feminism is a part of human rights, yet needs to be addressed specifically in the present day. As for the reason there are still thousands of people who advocates and believes in equal rights, equality, freedom for all etc., but finds it hard to go along with the word as well as the movement – 'feminism'.

Feminism simply can be defined as the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities; a movement initiated to attain the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. But still many people vehemently dissent to agree with the concept of feminism, as they view it as an attempt of woman to be same as man. Here it is to be noted that "sameness" and "equality" are not similar, of course it is true that man and women are biologically different, but this difference cannot deny women to have a say in their lives.

Feminism just claims for a balance between men and women in the society, that everyone should be treated equally with respect to their differences. The ideology may appear simple and some might even feel that women have achieved the so called "equality" but the truth is that, there is still a long way to go to. The hindrances in this path are many such as the historical, cultural, and even the traditional practices and beliefs, which are indeed deeply rooted in our society as well as in the minds of

people. Gender roles and stereotypes are ever existing challenges in the path to attain gender equality.

Culture is part of the fabric of every society, it names us, defines us and even distinguishes us from one another. However irrespective of the people belonging to different cultural groups, the general pattern of women being regarded as inferior to men is evident in all cultural groups. In every sphere of life, the disparity terming "women's role" and "men's role" still exists and culture do, has got a great role to play in it. This inequality is a matter needed to be discussed and addressed upon.

A world which prevents certain people from accessing their rights, denying opportunities to some people, in no way can become a prosperous one. May be this realization has brought up the changes which we see today, though there is a long way ahead of us to reach its pinnacle. The writings and even the works of great personalities say, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft in the 18th century to the 21st century reformist feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have indeed made great contributions in evoking changes in the minds of people. In her *We Should All be Feminists*, Adichie offers a definition to feminism in the twenty-first century, drawing precisely from her own experiences and understanding which appeals the reader to re-think and even remould his thoughts and ideas, to shape a new society where men and women has got equal say over their respective rights and roles.

The arguments and debates on this very much familiar topic – feminism dates back to the period since its beginning. Feminism has been maligned and often misunderstood. Women who have come forth demanding their rights and equality have been accused of trying to dominate the society, taking down the privileges of man, and attempting to establish their power over them. It is a word which provokes wide range of reactions within people, many of which are against the movement. The lauded author's concise *We Should All be Feminists* has been widely acknowledged for its ability to throw light upon the attitudes of people who are blindfolded by the misinterpretations regarding feminism. It is an intuitive contribution made by Adichie, which is capable to sway the minds of the masses, making them realize the need of hour to react and reforms the society to ensure equality and equity among themselves irrespective of their differences especially gender disparity.

Adichie redefines the hotly debated topic feminism through her work *We should all be Feminist* in which she states feminism as nothing but a radical belief that women too are people through narrating bitter experience which she had come across, Adichie successfully divert the attention of people on the need for such a movement and belief. She makes it clear how the concept of feminism is a part of women right but still need to be recognised differently. She also addresses on the stereotypical idea of feminism, bigoted attitude towards those who claim to be feminists and the need for both men and women to become feminists. Gender inequality and how the so-called culture shapes boys and girls into their specific gender roles are the issues presented here. These are not mere experiences but universal problems which people across the world can relate to.

We Should All Be Feminists is an exploration on what it means to be a feminist which the author conveys through clear conversational style of writing and ends with a call for why we should all be feminists. Her style truly displays her academic credentials and excellence as an author. More over it has the ability to pierce through the hearts and minds of readers. Through a plethora of personal occurrences in her native Nigeria in the US and even abroad. She succeeds in laying a commonality with her audiences. Though she centres around her native land her narrative addresses the inequalities and discriminations spread across the world. She is able to relate her experiences to that of the entire women population and seek attention of everyone to be a feminist not as 'men haters', but someone who upholds equality for all.

The label 'feminist' is often weighed down with several baggage's which Adichie clearly points out in her essay. She begins the work by recalling the incident when she was called a feminist by her male best friend which she says "It was not a compliment I could tell from his tone -the same tone with which a person would say 'you're a supporter of terrorism' (8). Though she was unable to comprehend the word back then later she claimed herself to be a 'feminist' which was gradually modified into "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men and Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men" (10). It is well evident that the negative stigma that hangs around the word 'feminist' which needs to be erased off, is nothing but mere patriarchal norms that has been imposed since ages.

The narrative illustrates inequalities drawing from her own life in a chronological order – beginning with her childhood, unaware of the word 'feminist' itself, to ending with a narrative of her grandmother being a feminist, even without her own knowledge—who stood up for herself challenging her culture which actually confines her and other women like her from

dreaming a much better life in which they become masters of their own lives, rather than the male relatives being the masters. Inequality still exists in our society and many claim that it occurs due to our so called 'culture'. We just follow, what it has been following, ignoring the changes taking place in all walks of life, we dare not to bring any change in our culture, may be because it is something which we have inherited. But we fail to understand the fact that, if changes can bring developments in our life, why not bring some change to the so called- culture too. Since we build up this society and so the culture, it depends on us to change our culture which draws a demarcation line between men and women on several aspects. Adichie call attention to this matter through a number of instances where she was mistreated just because of her gender. Thus, through each of her personal narratives she tries to give an answer as to why we should all be feminist and how by being a feminist we can fight this disparity between men and women. Also, it discusses the role culture plays in paving way for this disparity between a man and a woman.

It's obvious that even today sexism exist in all walks of life, then why do we hesitate to raise feminism which is much more apt and good for ourselves, as a weapon against it, for achieving a much better world where both men and women are viewed equally. For feminism is simply to be in par with men in all aspects. Adichie entitles the fact that we are being taught and thus accepts it as normal for men 'to rule the world' because it starts to seem natural for them to have an upper hand everywhere. This 'normalisation' lambasts the actions of women while safeguarding those of men and thus nurturing a difference between both. If we consider it normal for women to be paid same as the men, to judge her too on the basis of intelligence of knowledge instead of hormones then it can be said that our ideas of gender have also evolved, but this is far from reality, just like what Adichie points in her essay.

"Gender matters. Men and women experience the world differently. Gender colours the way we experience the world. But we can change that"(TED Talk 2019 min 25:27) quotes Adichie. She narrates several incidents to substantiate this statement. She recalls the incident when a valet, whom she had given a tip, actually thanked the male friend-Louie who was accompanying her, because he had got the wrong assumption that Louie was her husband and whatever money she had actually belonged to him. The delusions that only man can be a breadwinner and the woman as always dependent on him still exist within our society.

Similarly, she shares another experience wherein she felt as a human, what it means to be ignored and invisible just because she is a 'woman'. She says whenever she walks into a Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man while ignoring her. This has been in practice, since they were taught as such, that is to consider men more important than women. Thus, it's time to unlearn these gender norms which shaped our thoughts. Here the argument on why feminism is necessary and its relevance in today's world exists. The best weapon to this problem of gender bias, is indeed the approach of a feminist. Adichie through her work point out the role of culture in gender discrimination Igbo culture present in Africa treated men as superior to women. Men were given all important positions of authority both central and state, they were even credited with lineage right. It was men who ruled each and every sphere of Igbo society.

Though her experiences are solely based on the misbeliefs of her Nigerian culture, it indeed approaches as a matter of whole world itself, that is in spite of hailing from different cultural

backgrounds general view of women having less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal, and limited influence over the decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives, is a common thread that ties up all these cultural differences together. Hence the expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and about gender, the way it functions providing a grave injustice to both the sexes – are shaped by culture.

Adichie comments upon the way the children are raised such a way that they should know how they are different from each that is man is always superior to women. From childhood itself they are raised to believe that they are brave, tougher or ambitious, all they have to be pleasing and aspiring for their marriage. And the problem lies here itself, when changes are taking place in all spheres of life, people still are not able to accept that the power of girls not less than the boys, thus change must be bought in the way the children are raised.

She says “Gender matters everywhere in the world. And I would like today to ask that we should begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently”. (25) Ngozi argues for an imperative change of attitude in the way children are raised for a promised future of gender equality.

Gender inequality or gender bias or gender discrimination whatever it is, is no more a matter to be discussed among the women circle, but need to be briefed generally where both men and woman should take equal participation. This should begin from home itself because it creates the society which further contributes to a better and safer world. Children should be taught to respect each other irrespective of gender. They should do their domestic work equally; everyone should have a say of their own. Just like a man, woman too has the right to dream and aspire not about her marriage but about her future, her career, her own freedom. People should understand the fact that culture and the so-called beliefs which are being followed was the output of man's creation, so its natural and acceptable to bring changes to it in order to build a culture and through it a world where everyone is treated and viewed equally despite of biological differences between the genders.

Internalising ideas through socialization can reduce the so-called difference between a man and woman is what a better solution as suggested by Adichie. The age-old concepts of women being treated as inferior to men, being confined within the four walls, with the burden of domestic works should no longer be followed, since it will end up with the same outcomes of living a miserable life, just like a prisoner. Women should learn to raise their voice where ever its necessary. One should not be ashamed or guilty of being a woman though through the act of normalisation that is what we have been witnessing. Ngozi vehemently demands to become an unapologetic feminist, accepting the way you are because that what everyone deserves.

Ngozi eloquently airs her views on how culture has key role in shaping the gender inequality that we face even today. Many people regard this as an unimportant topic of discussion especially because they believe such discriminations no more exists or else because they take to notice even think about ‘gender’. Due to this ignorance the problem still lays on without any end. The idea of feminism or gender equality itself triggers feeling of threatening among the Man folk they view it as questioning the natural power of male dominance.

Gender discrimination has become ‘natural and normal’. It has got well blended with our lives or else it's better to say we have

learnt to adjust with such injustice. Even when there weren't any such movement or rights, not all women were ready to ‘compromise’ or make ‘peace with their marriage’ merely because that is what they are supposed to do so. Just like Adichie States the instance of her own great grandmother who refused, protested and stood up for herself even without knowing what feminism is. But today though there is legal equality and laws to tackle discrimination most of the people prefer to turn a blind eye towards the injustice's women face. People are eager to find fault with the women who suffers and let it go. As Adichie says “Yes rape is wrong, but what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?” (33).

The key focus of We should all be Feminists Is to provide an awareness for the most important query that cross the minds of the people when they hear the word ‘feminism or feminists’ especially the male population. The answer is that anyone can be a feminist and the entire book provides justification for this. Gender discrimination can be tracked down only when gender expectations are eliminated. Thus, feminism not only addresses the problems of women alone, but of men too. The norms of masculinity and femininity affects everyone in short, the society itself and thus having an equal balance representation is beneficial for all, then why not being a feminist. Because this is feminism is all about to bring up equality and balance between all genders, eradicate gender discrimination and gender expectation. Thus, feminism is not just for women, men can absolutely be a part of it.

The most remarkable point that Adichie makes Is how people defends themselves under the cover of ‘culture’. Thus, gender is nothing but a social construction which can be eliminated if everyone is ready to bring up the change. The gender stereotypes are deeply rooted within us, because we give more stress to culture. If it is culture which demands people to consider women to be subordinates of men then, such culture must be change. In fact, there is no point in arguing that culture cannot be changed, because that defines our past, since as it is evident from the instance Adichie provides that if there was no change in culture then at present there won't be any twins because according to the Iqbo culture the birth of twins is an evil omen. The culture too is subject to change.

Gender equality and non-discrimination have been laid down in the Nigerian Constitution for long but still, women continue to suffer injustices and marginalization. This is often as a result of discriminatory laws, religious and cultural norms, gender stereotypes, low levels of education, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women. African culture has a long tale of discrimination and injustice to woman as there has not been any equality on the opportunity dignity and power between men and women. The men were treated preferentially for economic empowerment and inheritances, as such the Igbos do not include women or girls in a will when sharing land or another asset.

So it's time for us to put on end to gender discrimination by embrace talking to kids about gender equality between sexes. Since time immemorial there existed certain gender roles that cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, taking care of children and elderly were the assigned roles of women. We can set an example by dividing the housework, involve boys in care work and household chores from an early age, along with girls. Adichie in her work states an example where a family who has a son and a daughter both equally brilliant at school were treated unequally. When the boy is hungry, the parents say to the girl to cook Indomie noodles for her brother. Even though she doesn't like to cook Indomie noodles she was forced to do as she was a girl. But what if the parents taught both boys and girls to cook

Worst custom present during those time even for attires men were taken as standard when Adichie was teaching and writing class for graduate school, she was self conscious and worried about what to wear so as to be taken seriously To avoid that Adichie wore a serious manly and ugly suit she considered it as undignified because it hurt a women's pride but at those times the more feminine a women appears the less likely she is to be taken seriously as a professional.

One such example is from the place Yoruba like many other places of Africa Yoruba is old so patriarchal there are more privileged and oriented while women are more discriminated and subordinated in all spheres of life economically, socially and politically they have no voice since the time of birth. Also, girl child is not treated as the way a boy child does right from the birth they were treated as inferior. In general women were thought to be fit for the kitchen, domestic affairs and assist with farm duties. Thus, making them dependents and subservient to their male counterpart.

It was believed that It's the fault of women to give birth to a girl child, though its scientifically proved that sex is determined through fathers. When a child is born the first question that is posed will centre around the sex without paying attention for the health of the mother or even the new born and also if it is a girl child, the mother is being blamed, she will be scolded and treated as a lazy, good for nothing woman, on the other hand if the child is a boy the mother will be praised.

Another belief of Yoruba culture is that male is always, praised and considered to give strength to the family and he is considered as the pillar of a family and one who populates it, on the other hand women are considered as one who depopulates. Considering the 'inheritance' also is not woman friendly. Women will not have any share in their property. No matter how young a male child and how old the female one, male child will only be the head of the family.

Another aspect of Yoruba culture is the imposition of taboos over women. Taboo is the prohibition against performing certain arts. It is a way in which certain kinds of behaviour is believed to be harmful to its members, such taboos are actually a way of enforcing patriarchal dominance. A menstruating woman must not participate in the sacrifice to Obatala (Yoruba divinity of fertility and other religious activities). Moreover, women are also forbidden from entering any sacred or religious practices, because menstruation is considered as an impure activity. Thus, these taboos apart from depicting women as being uncleansed equally reduces their relevance in religious activities. Women are also forbidden of watching Oro (a religious activity, an exclusive preserve of men). In order to prevent women from getting in it or to get knowledge about it they are not allowed to see it. Like Oro there are many other activities especially for men, most of them just like Oro are prohibited to women.

Chastity before marriage on the part of the woman was essential but the same does not go for the case of man. "We police girls. We praise girls for virginity but we don't praise boys for virginity (and it makes me wonder how exactly this is supposed to work out, since the loss of virginity is a process that usually involves two people of opposite genders)".(32).

The belief was that a woman who was not virtuous at marriage will be seen as disgrace both for herself as well as by her family members; it is to be noted that there is no questioning of this so-called important concept of chastity when it comes to the bridegroom's side. Nigerian culture, as many African cultures, allows or even encourages men to contract polygamous marriage and a man who engages in extra marital relations does not receive general condemnation as a woman does. He might even

be privately hailed for his behaviour. On the other hand, not only would such an act by a married receive wide Condemnation but would in fact be ruthlessly and severely punished.

These are just a few of the situations which substantiates the dominant role played by culture in the lives of Nigerians and more over how it led to the weighing of men and women differently. Though its said progress has been made, to make sure such practices are wiped out, still it cant be said to be achieved completely. The attitude and thinking of both men and women must be subject to change. Change must at first be made in ones home, the way one treats their children, boys and girls should have equal treatment, freedom and right to express themselves.

The continuous efforts made by Government and several other public organisations have come up with the result of what we see today. Laws and policies have been initiated, to ensure gender equality and to put an end to the most despicable activity woman have to go through—child marriage and mitigate its consequences by fairly financing access to sexual and reproductive health services. Investments have also made on protecting them from further getting exploited through sexual and gender-based violence, and access to safe, quality education for the most deprived and marginalized girls. It's the responsibility of all to work together to empower girls and change the patriarchal laws and social norms especially cultural constructions that limit girls' potential and drive rights violations.

All in all, through the thought-provoking work, *We Should All be Feminists*, Adichie succinctly expresses her views on feminism as it never means to limit the opportunity of men but rather it allows them to achieve more by supporting the women equally. The book address how a society as a whole must get ready to change if the equality which we verbally ensure to all but still lacks practicality is to be achieved.

The general assumption that cultural values are static or are not subject to change because it is something which is handed over from generation to generation will question the efforts made for long to achieve gender equality by both men and women equally. She explains the necessity to reshape and remould culture, if the culture lays down restrictions for one section of society and the power being concentrated in the hands of man and he with this supremacy dominates over the weak and enacts the gender roles leading to gender inequalities. "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture". (46)

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