

RAISING A FEMINIST SON – AN ANTIDOTE WITH REFERENCE TO CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS

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Abstract

General awareness about raising boys, who are conscious of not only ways to respect women but also identifying gender stereotypes and rising above them, is still a relatively unexplored subject. This paper argues for the adoption of feminist epistemologies to unpack the role, nature and effects of gender (in) equality. And it ends with a call for greater self-reflexivity to achieve a more just and equitable society, thus benefiting both women and men. The essay *We should All Be Feminists* by the Nigerian born author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a unique definition of feminism for the twenty-first century. It is her remarkable exploration of what it means to be a woman in the present day world. She elegantly narrates by drawing incidents extensively on her own experiences and her understanding of the often masked realities of sexual politics. The paper highlights Adichie’s reasoning behind why we should all be feminists which seems appropriate and recognizes her idea of breeding a new generation of feminism. Through this paper, the researcher entuses the readers to dream about and plan for a different world - A Fairer World. The feminist debate will transform what is so often a divisive, volatile and confrontational subject into a clear-headed, honest and beautifully argued statement.

Keywords: *feminist son, fairer world, gender stereotypes, gender equality.*

Bell Hooks, one of the most celebrated feminist writers and theorists articulates ethics of love which she believed to be crucial to the discourse and praxis of feminism. It was Hooks who claimed in one of her seminal texts, first published at the turn of the twenty-first century, that *Feminism is for Everybody* (2015). We go further to say that feminism is for everybody who believes in the power of love (expressed both as an emotion and as activism) to free societies from hegemonizing patriarchal epistemologies, institutional structures, and policies which have proven detrimental to both women and men.

We Should All Be Feminists (2014) was adapted from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s popular TEDx Talk of the same name. The talk was first delivered at TEDxEuston, which is held annually in Great Britain and features prominent leaders and thinkers speaking about issues relating to Africa. “Feminist is not a bad word” says Adichie. She says that everyone should be feminist. She starts with an anecdote about her friend, Okoloma, with whom she grew up. He called Adichie a feminist. She did not even know what the word meant at that time but understood that it was not a compliment. Okoloma was criticizing her. She never forgot this incident.

Many years later, Adichie published her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. It is about a Nigerian man who, though a public hero, has violent outbursts at home and beats his wife so mercilessly that she finally resorts to poison him to escape the abuse. When the novel got published, some Nigerian men advised her not to call herself a feminist, as feminists are all unhappy and they hate men. But this incident did not make Adichie abandon her feminism. Rather she embraced it. Adichie now refers to herself as a feminist, in part to defy these stereotypes.

Adichie tells her experiences growing up in Nigeria to indicate this point. She remembers the time when she scored good marks in a class test – an achievement which was awarded with the position of

class leader. Except that on that occasion, the job was given to the pupil who had managed the second highest mark – a boy. Adichie asked why, and the teacher replied the title was always going to be rewarded to a boy – the teacher had assumed this would be obvious to the students. “I have never forgotten that incident,” says Adichie. “If we do it again and again, it becomes normal. If we see something over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem ‘natural’ that only men should be heads of corporations.”

And, indeed many years later Adichie suffers a similar crushing experience when she tips a man in Lagos for helping to park her car, the man thanked her friend – again, a man. Because he assumes that any money Adichie has must come from a man. Sometimes, what Adichie thinks obvious may not be obvious to others, as when a male friend of hers fails initially to understand that the servant who thanks him for the tip Adichie paid for is being sexist. This shows the traditional Nigerian attitude towards gender and money. Men are considered to be the breadwinners, and as such men keep all the the financial power. These two incidents cannot be seen isolated. They both are the parts of the same systemic problem.

Adichie delivers an authentic version of feminism to our generation; evolved beyond the second and third waves of feminism. This new feminism is groundbreaking. Not because it recognizes and refutes gender inequality in a better way, but because it identifies the source of the problem itself. Adichie shows the origin of gender roles, and prejudice as products of society and social experiences.

Culture does not make people; People make culture. (Adichie, 2014)

The power to change a culture and societal standards lie in each and until that power are acknowledged, culture will not change. Adichie proves the relevance of feminism beyond how it has historically been defined. Feminism is not strictly a female phenomenon. With conviction and purpose, she gives concrete meaning to the abstract idea of why we should all be feminists.

Gender is not an easy conversation. It makes people feel uncomfortable. Men and women are hesitant to discuss gender, or eliminate the problems of gender. Thinking of changing the status quo is always a problem. “men feel intimidated by the idea of feminism,” says Adichie. This comes from the insecure feeling triggered by the way boys are brought up. She is not attacking men here but offends a society that is made up of men and women which brings boys up to think in detrimental way.

We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys in this cage. (Adichie, 2014)

Adichie focuses on the pay gap and the gendered nature of financial power. In Nigeria, women are expected to do the same work for less wages, and they learn not to express for themselves for the fear of being called hostile.

Adichie concludes saying that we do disservice to men and women by teaching them to stick to the stern gender roles. We must accept that there is sexism, and we have to fight to fix this problem. Adichie is repeating a message shared by others for generations – though rarely as calmly, concisely and convincingly. Yet, if all these were so clear there would not have been any need for her to give a TEDx talk. *We Should All Be Feminists* is a potent tour de force on the subject of gender equality. Adichie’s is not the language of warfare; it does not seek to rebuke men or set one sex against other. She feels that the society must change if equality is to be achieved.

In her new book *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), Adichie gives instructions for raising a feminist daughter. She envisions ways mothers can nurture strong girls, from rejecting traditional gender roles to leading by example (by being ‘a full person’). On the contrary, a recent *New York Times* article, *How to Raise A Feminist Son*, reinforces the idea relevant to the current

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discussion. If we want to build an equitable society, we need to give boys more choices. As the feminist trailblazer, Gloria Steinem says,

“I am glad we’ve begun to raise our daughters more like our sons, but it will never work until we raise our sons more like our daughters.” (New York Times, 2017)

That is because women’s roles cannot expand if men’s do not too. But it is not just about women. Men are getting behind in school and work because we are not raising boys to succeed in the new, pink economy. Skills like cooperation, empathy, and diligence – often considered to be feminine – are increasingly valued in modern-day work and school, and jobs that require these skills are the fastest growing. We should reverse course on how we raise a boy to build a society of man who respect a woman and treat her as his equal.

What the hundreds of heart-wrenching stories of sexual harassment and abuse have shown is that the onus of stopping this toxic culture should not be solely in the hands of girls and women, but shared among boys and men. Rape culture does not end by just shaming the predators; it ends by dismantling the educated behaviors that have enabled it. In our society, it is easier to show our child gender equality with mothers going to work and fathers sharing housework. Fathers are bigger role-models now with their share on parenting. This shift of the trouble of household responsibilities moving from females of the family to the males is a contributor to shaping the way our boys perceive women in society.

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