

**A Critical Analysis of the Gender Question in Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists***

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Abstract

This study chiefly focuses on gender-based issues in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*. Applying the theory of social constructionism and qualitative resources such as critical analyses of the salient points in the text, this paper argues that women are grossly undervalued in the African context. This is not only because of the prejudiced societal constructions of femininity in the continent but additionally, due to the pattern of training to which young men are exposed. Hence, these authors advocate special trainings for boys in ways that would imbue them with respect for women. The absence of a formidable gender parity beginning from infancy destroys the man-woman relations as well as enfeebles women in the Nigerian society.

Keywords: gender, masculinity, femininity, social construction, African.

Introduction

In reviewing the contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft, the controversial feminist, Kaplan poses this question:

Was the erotic and affective imagination, gendered or universal, a blessing or a curse for women? Was it indispensable to radical consciousness, irrefutably a part of human psychic life, or was it something that could and should be jettisoned or retrained? If gendered identity was largely a matter of social construction . . . then could a brave new world reconstruct its unconscious as well as its conscious wishes? (Kaplan 259)

Mary Wollstonecraft concerned herself with the issues of identity, fantasy and desire, and her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* demonstrates the ferocity of the contest between masculinities and femininities. Similarly, emerging in the shadow of the momentous changes in the Western society, and motivated by the quest to reverse patriarchal assumptions and institutions, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie furthers the questions on gender attribution and the construction of masculine and feminine roles.

Although gender roles are trans-generational and remain unnoticed until they are studied, they breed imbalances between the binaries, and propel inequality and discriminating disparities. These differences in gender tasks, according to Lauretis, are primarily hinged on “cultural backgrounds, historical changes, geographical location and religious. . .” tenets which are preeminent in a given society (46). Unfortunately, even though some roles and practices are harmful to the gendered subjects and society at large, they are sustained on account of ignorance or perpetuation of tradition. The foregoing accounts for why gender inequality thrives, and constitutes the background for *We should all be Feminists* by

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a TEDTalk (later published as a book) that addresses the conventionalities upon which gender roles are built. In the feminist pamphlet, the author emphasises how certain gender roles are inimical to the progress of women, in a developing country such as Nigeria.

The study is situated within the theory of social constructionism which was introduced by two sociologists, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. These proponents posit that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context and that much of what we perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions. Therefore, the theorists argue that concepts and practices considered as normative in contemporary societies such as the understanding of gender, race, class and disability are social constructs and, consequently, unable to reflect actual reality. Social Constructionism holds that gender which comprises the behavioural patterns associated with heterosexual men and women is a socially constructed phenomenon. Often distinguished from sex which several scholars consider as the “biological” manifestation of a person as “either male or female” (Millet 140), gender identities and categories are enunciated and sustained by the socialization process. The distinction is built on the belief that sex informs gender: the genital of a child determines the gender roles s/he will be assigned to construct corresponding masculine or feminine identities.

Gergen explains social constructionism as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (265). Andrew, citing Gablin, in her paper titled, “An Introduction to Social Constructionism,” states that although genetically inherited factors and social factors are at work at the same time, social constructionism does not deny

the influences of genetic inheritance, but decides to concentrate on investigating the social influences on communal and individual life. In conclusion, social constructionism is a sociological theory that rationalises human behaviour and gender practices and categories on the plank of social determinism.

The Gender Question in *we Should all be Feminists*

We Should All Be Feminists is an exposé on the “idea of feminism” and the stereotypes that inhibit the acceptance and practice of the movement in Nigeria (7). Drawing from personal life experiences in Nigeria and the United States of America, Adichie argues that gender inequality is a fallout of an imbalance in the construction of roles for men and women. Children, right from infancy, are socialised into gender-specific roles founded on discrimination against the girl-child. Femininity is constructed to keep a girl reserved, likable and, most importantly, silent. Citing an American psychologist known as McGhee, Amaefula notes that, unlike a male child, during the first six years of their lives, girls are essentially trained to repress humor” (Amaefula “No Longer” 136). Each time a girl child seeks rights enjoyed by men in a patriarchal setting, she is blackmailed and shamed as being repulsively feminine. Recounting her experience with a man who offered her advice about her feminist novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie states as follows:

He told me that people were saying my novel was feminist, and his advice to me—he was shaking his head sadly as he spoke—was that I should never call myself a feminist since feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands. (8)

The association of feminism in Nigeria with a form of terrorism executed by ‘bitter women’ who are ‘unable to find husbands’ has made many African writers to dissociate themselves from the feminist tag (Amaefula 54). In conformity with normative femininity, many African women have chosen to be content in subservience. Their passivity is rooted in the division of labour between men and women; assignment of patriarchal benefits to men at the expense of women, among other socialisation processes leading youth towards maturing to perpetuate the same pattern as adults. This explains why Simone de Beauvoir avers that, “one is not born a woman; one becomes one” (78).

Unequal roles assigned to men and women are often justified on the grounds of tradition, biological structures and attributes. Hence, the physical structure and prowess amongst other attributes determine the roles assigned to a particular sex. Since a woman is biologically built to reproduce and nurture the young ones, the position of a care giver and a delicate essence is assigned to her. On the other hand, the high level of testosterone which accounts for aggressiveness is rationalized as the reason why man should be a provider and protector. Challenging the status quo however, Adichie raises the following gender issues in the book:

(i.) Gender Inequality/Discrimination

Gender inequality continues to pose serious challenges in Africa. “Women mostly lack control over resources” and “without any control of anything” or adequate representation, they are more likely to be affected by poverty than men. (Maogi 2). Gender inequality is based on the belief that men and women are not equal. Thus, women are socialized into roles considered inferior to masculine tasks, leading to gender discrimination. These two concepts highlight the inherent imbalance in the perception of

gender in several societies in Africa. In the text under focus, Adichie provides an unsettling instance on how gender-based discriminations work out and in Nigeria, thus:

When I was in primary school in Nsukka, a university town in southeastern Nigeria, my teacher said at the beginning of term that she would give the class a test and whoever got the highest score would be the class monitor. Class monitor was a big deal. . . I very much wanted to be class monitor. And I got the highest score in the test. Then, to my surprise, my teacher said the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier; she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second-highest score in the test. And *he* would be monitor. What was even more interesting is that this boy was a sweet, gentle soul who had no interest in [it] while *I* was full of ambition to do so. (9)

Apparently, the discrimination meted out to the author was based solely on the fact she was a girl and must therefore be imprisoned in roles considered inferior to traditionally masculine tasks. This discrimination often times hinders growth, civilisation and development as a particular gender group is believed to remain leaders at all times, leading to poor results arising from apathy and a lackadaisical attitude. For instance, Adichie's interest in the class monitor position would have propelled her to be more effective than the boy who is indifferent about the role. Merit and expected efficiency were sadly sacrificed to perpetuate custom. Indeed, Adichie's sexist female-teacher and the politics of patriarchy in her class are symptomatic of the workings of the larger society.

The Nigerian society restricts the roles of women to a particular trend and this has, to a large extent, limited their contribution to societal growth, causing women to underutilize their

innate abilities and competences for the general well-being of the country. As Klasen observes,

[A]rtificial barriers to female employment in the formal sector may contribute to higher labor costs and lower international competitiveness, as women are effectively prevented from offering their labor services at more competitive wages. In this context, it may be important to point out that a considerable share of the export success of [African] economies was based on female-intensive light manufacturing. (8)

The inhibition of women's progress on the grounds of gender inequality is the bane of development in Nigeria. Be it in political leadership or top management positions, women are grossly under-represented in the country, on the grounds of gender-based discriminations. In spite of the fact that women constitute "52% of the world's population. . . , most positions of power and prestige are occupied by men" (Adichie 10), causing the late Kenyan Nobel peace laureate, Wangari Maathai to lament that, "The higher you go, the fewer women there are" (qtd. in Adichie 10). This situation is worsened by its obscure status to many Nigerians; it is rather taken as a normative normalcy. As Adichie recounts in *We Should All Be Feminists*,

I often make the mistake of thinking that something that is obvious to me is just as obvious to everyone else. Take my dear friend Louis, who is a brilliant, progressive man. We would have conversations and he would tell me: "I don't see what you mean by things being different and harder for women. Maybe it was so in the past but not now. Everything is fine now for women." I didn't understand how Louis could not see what seemed so evident. (9)

Because most people consider unequal roles as normal in Nigeria, gender inequality and discrimination continue to restrict knowledge and development of both the girl-child and, ironically, even the boy. The prohibition of boys and men from the kitchen, for example, subordinates them infinitely to women who cook for them. Culinary skills, in the African society, is an exclusive preserve of women. To cap this anomaly, the society views men who show interest in it as less than men.

(ii.) Gender at Public Places and Offices

Adichie points out that specific work places, positions and individuals occupying top management offices are gendered. Bell Hooks substantiates this point, thus:

[G]ender is an organising feature of social structure used to define roles and expectations in all domains from the work place to the family. [S]ociety is structured around gender in a patriarchal manner that places women in a subordinate position to men in virtually all domains. (62)

In the Nigerian context, there are different treatments and reactions to the same thing when done by a man or a woman. For instance, guards and receptionists will always ‘cross-examine’ women who walk into hotels alone, demanding them to prove beyond reasonable doubts their identities, hosts and, possibly, the key card to their rooms. These embarrassing questions are based on belief that a Nigerian woman who walks into a hotel alone is a sex worker because “a Nigerian female alone cannot possibly be a guest paying for her own room. A man who walks into the same hotel is not harassed” (Adichie 10).

Similarly, a woman is trained to be obsessed with the thought of being liked. She is expected to always appear clean, nice

and full of smiles. Therefore, in Nigeria, it is not lady-like for a woman to express anger or discipline her fellow adults at office. Nigerians believe that a woman should be soft and motherly and must thus bring on a motherly touch to any official position she occupies. Adichie illustrates this pattern of thought as follows:

I have a friend, an American woman, who took over a managerial position from a man. Her predecessor had been considered a [blunt], “tough go-getter”. She took on her new job, and imagined herself equally tough. . . Only weeks into her new job, she disciplined an employee about a forgery on a time sheet, the same thing her predecessor would have done. The employee then complained to top management [that] she was aggressive and difficult to work with. Other employees agreed. One said they had expected she would bring a “woman’s touch” to her job but that she hadn’t. It didn’t occur to any of them that she was doing the same thing for which a man had been praised. (11)

Gender discrimination at offices remain equally obvious but ironically unnoticed. If her predecessor had disciplined that same employee, he would have been praised for firmness in his discharge of duties. But because the new boss is a woman, she is expected not to discipline errant staff. Surprisingly, when she runs down the organization by being over-lenient, it would be argued that women are weak and unfit for positions of authority. This implies that women are made vulnerable by their socially expected roles (Amaefula “Ideological Commitment” 261). Even at the peak of anger, she is not expected to express it but to cry out her anger privately to perhaps a confidante who would console her. After all, becoming too angry in public is not ‘ladylike’ and may make her ‘unlikeable.’

(iii.) Gender, Marriage and Family

Marriage is the union of a man and woman to become husband and wife who, through procreation or adoption, bring forth children. Gender roles in marriage and family are clearly defined by patriarchy. Any violation of assigned roles results in chaos. Adichie explains that when a woman finally stops pretending to enjoy housework, the society, especially her in-laws, attack her (15). More so, when she does not meet up with her role as caregiver, due perhaps to internal or sometimes external influences, the society confronts her. Adichie reveals that the society ignores the fact that one might not be well-suited for the universal roles assigned to one's gender. It would rather prefer a haphazard delivery of tasks to allowing a competent person of another gender to carry out the function. The indifferent class monitor mentioned above suffices.

There is also the battle of superiority which causes more harm than good to marriages and families. The predominant belief, as Adichie ponders, is that a man is superior to the woman and, therefore, must dictate to his family. This fight for hegemony causes harms to marriages as women struggle to emancipate and develop themselves rather than allow men's dominance. African men consider women empowerment as a tussle to emasculate them. It is common to see women reduced to housewives because their husbands fear that a woman who wields economic power might challenge his authority at home. Examples abound of women who give up on their career and future on the altar of marriage so as to fit into the society's image of a good woman. Adichie rightly states that the language of a husband is that of ownership. Most men see their wives as chattels and themselves as owners, subjecting women to serial domestic violence to prove this point.

Then there is the curse ascribed to singlehood. A funny speculation was made by Nigerians that the year 2018 might be the final year for marriage. Ignorantly, many women worked hard to get married. This shows that many single ladies view marriage as a societal achievement. There is a stigma of failure that is associated with an unmarried woman at the age of 30 years and above. Adichie illustrates as follows:

I know an unmarried woman in Nigeria who, when she goes to conferences, wears a wedding ring because she wants her colleagues to—according to her—“give her respect.” The sadness in this is that a wedding ring will indeed automatically make her seem worthy of respect, while not wearing a wedding ring would make her easily dismissible—and this is in a modern workplace. (13)

A woman is expected to marry and raise a family and an unmarried middle-aged man is believed to have failed in his first obligation of sustaining the human race. Thus, when a young couple decides to wait for a few years before procreating, the society dismisses them as abnormal.

(iv.) Gender, Culture and Children

Another hard gender issue raised in the text is culture—the totality of a people’s lifestyle. According to Adichie, culture functions ultimately to ensure the preservation and continuity of a people (17). This explanation deductively means that there existed people before culture and culture was adopted to ensure sustained ethos of human beings. It also implies that culture is alterable over time in tandem with societal advancement and environmental changes. However, the dynamism of culture seems to elude gender.

Harmful gendered roles are embedded in cultural practices and thus granted widespread acceptance.

The Nigerian culture prohibits a man from expressing his full psychology. He is taught to be afraid of fear, weakness, vulnerability and crying. At infancy, boys are rather taught to embrace strength and tenacity which are likened to masculinity. This is unfair, especially to a category of men who are born to be as naturally soft as the unwilling class monitor, and ambitious and tough women who seek to wield power and control. These individuals whose internal fixtures contradict gendered expectations, are forced to reverse whom they are in order to preserve culture. Once an individual engages in a conduct considered "uncultured", he or she is branded a deviant. Consequently, Nigerians live for culture and not for themselves.

Another major issue of gender is children. The Nigerian culture attaches a great value to children. Because a woman is believed to be close to nature, she is saddled with the task of nurturing a child from the embryo stage to adulthood. Gender discriminations also exist among children being nurtured. In African societies for example, a boy is usually preferred to a girl-child and the lack/short supply of the former often leads to marital chaos. When a girl-child is born,

...the new mother [is filled] with anxiety over the possibility of being replaced with a new wife while her husband, especially one who has been looking for a male child, may resort to the bottle, inebriating (himself) to forget (his) disappointment, anger and even sorrow. (Okoh 43)

The excerpt above illustrates the condition of a new mother of a female child in some situations. The woman is wholly blamed for

being unable to bear male children, even though it is the man's semen that produces the determinant chromosome for the conception of male children. Similarly, infertility is exclusively viewed as a woman's making, even when there is no evidence to that effect. A wife is compelled to go through many medical tests to prove her innocence while it is only on rare occasions that her husband is encouraged to go for a medical check-up.

Furthermore, masculine roles usually thrust more responsibilities on boys than femininity does to girls. The latter subjected to household chores and other roles that render them passive while the former are made protectors and providers even when they lack the means to do so. For fear of societal mockery and shame, boys feel compelled to do anything il/legitimate in order to live up to expectations. Indeed, masculinity squeezes men too hard, and stifles humanity in them. Adichie expresses this sentiment, thus: "We wonder why boys are more likely to steal from their parents" (12). In spite of the negativities associated with toughening boys, the society continues to uphold the erroneous view that training one to be a neutral person who relies on one's ability is a failed course. Nigerians seem not to be cognizant of the fact that the contemporary world places emphasis on one's intellect and not muscular structures.

(v.) Gender and Feminism

Feminism holds that women as a group are treated repressively and contrarily from men and that they are imperiled by personal and institutional discriminations. Feminists thus suppose that society is planned in such a way that it produces, in general, endless benefits for men and not women. In the words of Adichie, "a feminist is one who believes in the social, political and economic importance of the sexes" (17). Feminism is

an ideological movement geared towards liberating women in a world where their true worth and values are undermined. The feminist message is hinged on reversing patriarchal beliefs that mystify men's competence and denigrate women as generally weak, soft and ineffectual. Feminism is a reaction against gender discrimination. It seeks to reverse the politics of exclusion and suppression that hinders the progress of women.

Although the movement has been repeatedly dismissed as a western concept, Filomena Chioma Steady argues that

feminism is a strategy that African women have developed and consistently adopted for their survival in the face of [gender] oppression: True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of the black women in Africa and in the diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice. (35)

Therefore, the claim can be made that "the African woman is...the original feminist" (Steady 36). In substantiation of the foregoing, Ifi Amadiume makes a similar conclusion in her seminal analysis of Igbo society. She argues that although "militant feminism" is "a comparatively new phenomenon in the Western world," it has been "a constant reality for women in traditional Igbo societies" (Amadiume 10). Based on these scholarly efforts to domesticate feminism in Africa, the politics of Western origin concerning the movement is flawed.

In the context of Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, there is emphasis on the feminist message that nature bestows same capabilities equally on man and woman. Every individual has an underlying ability to perform a task. Biologically, the binary sexes differ but in terms of competences and intellectual abilities, both

men and women are evenly equal. Hence, the traditional practice of training men to protect and provide for women is needless. Adichie rues the fact that,

We police girls. . . . We make them feel as though by being born female they are guilty of something. And so they grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretence into an art form. (14)

In the above statement, Adichie summarises the gendered life of an average Nigerian woman. The Igbo culture in Nigeria teaches women to be silent, voiceless and powerless at all times. If a woman has an opinion, it must be in her home where such view is subjected to her husband's scrutiny. This culture of silence is the object of feminist activism: there is no weaker sex; the abilities and perseverance of an individual, regardless of sexes, guarantee success. This mentality finds expression in the successes recorded by Nigerian women's recent involvement in the business of transportation; the emergence of male chefs and hairstylists, in spite of the prevalent but waning stigmatisations.

Gendered salaries and wages also pose a problem. Adichie questions the practice of paying a higher salary to men than women, even when they are on the same level and do the same work, requiring the same energy, intellectual input and diligence. Pointing out the practice of rebuffing of ideas emanating from women even when same points are applauded if men suggest them, Adichie recalls the experience of one of her friends:

I have another friend, also an American woman, who has a high-paying job in advertising. She is one of two women in her team. Once, at a meeting, she said she had felt slighted by her boss, who had ignored her comments and then

praised something similar when it came from a man. She wanted to speak up, to challenge her boss. But she didn't. Instead, after the meeting, she went to the bathroom and cried, then called me to vent about it. She didn't want to speak up because she didn't want to seem aggressive. She let her resentments simmer. (11)

This indicates the society's preferential disposition for men at the expense of women. Undoubtedly, this mentality springs from stereotyping women as an incompetent people who must subject their opinions to men's scrutiny.

(vi.) Gender and Economic Control

Economic empowerment affords human beings a sense of independence and control. Over the years, it has been considered an appropriate feature of men while women who seek access to financial freedom are labelled as aggressive, over-ambitious persons. This negative branding inhibits women from pursuing wealth and sustains men's dominance of the economic world. A friend once told me that making money will make my husband uncomfortable and being unmarried and wealthy will scare away prospective suitors from me. I, therefore, identify with a woman whom Adichie narrated of how she had to sell off her house in order not to frighten or intimidate potential suitors.

One is compelled to wonder why the society does not teach men to genuinely admire and respect a financially independent woman who knows what she wants and goes for it, especially in consideration of the contemporary global economy. Such lessons will help reduce for men the burden of sole provision for the family thrust upon them by the patriarchal order. Beside mitigating the

financial burden on men, a gender-neutral economic world would also stimulate a healthy competition between men and women.

Being career-conscious does not prevent a woman from carrying out her duties at home as wife and mother. Famous Nigerian women such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ngozi Okonj-Iweala among others are successfully combining their duties in family with a fruitful career. Doing what one loves to do is not totally a bad idea. It neither makes one weak nor less a person; it should not even be a source of threat to others. Men should be taught that successful women are not scary or threatening and that, on no just grounds, should a woman give up her hard-earned career for marriage. A common thing in Nigeria is for a woman to let go of vocation for her marriage to survive even when she is the breadwinner. To protect his masculine ego, a man sacrifices the family's financial security in order to key into the social expectations of him to provide for his wife and children. He forgets that his burdensome gender role is assuaged when he allows his wife to keep her job to ensure the financial buoyancy of their home. Efforts should be made to encourage and allow women access to economic freedom, instead of asphyxiating their efforts, careers and future on the altar of marital bliss.

Importantly also, a woman's economic strength is stagnated in some establishments that enforce sexist policies, forbidding a woman to lead. Thus, women who have better qualifications and expertise are sometimes made to function under mediocre men who have poorer degrees, abilities and job experiences. This anomaly exists on the pretext that power intoxicates a woman easily enough to mar her femininity. One is therefore constrained to wonder if allocation of positions of authority should be based on gender categories or qualifications and demonstrated competences.

(vii.) Gender, Masculinity and Hegemony

The idea of masculine hegemony has often been deployed in gender studies beginning from the early-1980s to explain men's control and dominance over women. Emphasizing the legitimizing power of mutual assent (instead of crude physical or political force to bring woman to subservience), the concept often refers to socio-cultural forces as the basic root of men's conduct and reliance on aggression in their relations with women. Being a culturally endorsed practice sustained by the socialization process, Cornell argues that it is a function of choice:

A unifying aspect of much of this is an underlying premise that although men are structurally related to women in a superior position and inherently benefit from this what Raewyn Connell called the patriarchal dividend, they do have a 'choice' about whether or not actively to occupy oppressive positions vis-à-vis women. . . This choice may be highly constrained due to a lack of exposure to other ideas and information, but it is ultimately still a choice, and in this respect presents itself as a target for change by gender activists. A central task for individual-level work with men to change gender relations is to initiate a process of reflection on the implications of ways of living, and awareness of alternatives, to explore and empower them to work for gender equity. (qtd. in Jewkes et al 112-3)

Contributing to this target of giving men a re-orientation on their relations with women, Adichie explains the toxicity of normative masculinity to men's health and life. Being masculine entails that a person possesses such qualities traditionally associated with men as aggressiveness, ambitiousness, strength, assertiveness, domineering, activity and financial stability towards ensuring the protection and

provision of the needs of his family (Amaefula “Toxic Masculinity” 24). However, these gender features of an average man are not always the attainable. Evidence abounds that some men are soft-hearted, lazy, docile and passive yet biologically male; on the other hand, some women possess these qualities preserved exclusively for men. Hence, forcing such men to bend into the prescriptions of traditional masculinity is as good as overstraining them.

In order not to overstretch every male child who is unable to key into traditional masculine qualities, Adichie condemns the practice of toughening boys and proposes alternatives to make healthy their relations with women, thus:

We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a *very* narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak—a *hard man*. In secondary school, a boy and a girl go out, both of them teenagers with meager pocket money. Yet the boy is expected to pay the bills, always, to prove his masculinity.

(12)

Even though both the boy and girl are school children who wholly depend on their respective parents for provision, the former is expected to shoulder the task of providing for the latter—his fellow dependent. The fault lines in the socialization process imprisons a boy-child in a state of suffering. Although boys are born with high testosterone, they are still human beings who should have a complete psychology including crying to express hurt. They are humans first before being gendered differently from girls.

A false notion of general strength is imposed on boys, even when they might not possess corresponding energy. Thus, a man is trained to feel emasculated, inferior and second-rate, if a woman works harder than him and tries to assist him by shouldering some of his socially prescribed roles. The question then is, ‘what is really wrong with a woman stepping up to help out in a man’s roles?’ This is the crux of Adichie’s interrogation of normative masculinity. She is of the opinion that the more the Nigerian society makes men to bottle-up, and not express their emotions, the more they are being made less than humans; the more they are made to prefer the hard choice to gleefully receiving any form of assistance from women, the more they become rigid. These lead to toxicity in masculinity.

Adichie further states that men must be taught that there is nothing wrong in failing a task. This is because failure is a part of human experience and, most importantly, a step to success: most instances of disappointment inspire people to try again, applying different strategies that could lead to success. If a man works but is not able to meet the needs of the people he caters for, there is no harm if the woman steps up to do so. In the instance of who should provide for each other between a school boy and girl, Adichie wonders:

What if both boys and girls were raised *not* to link masculinity and money? What if their attitude was not “the boy has to pay,” but rather, “whoever has more should pay.” Of course, because of their historical advantage, it is mostly men who *will* have more today. But if we start raising children differently, then in fifty years, in a hundred years, boys will no longer have the pressure of proving their masculinity by material means.

But by far the worst thing we do to males—by making them feel they have to be hard—
—is that we leave them with *very* fragile egos. The *harder* a man feels compelled to be,
the weaker his ego is.

There is always a time when a person, whether a man or woman, is low on cash. In such situations, the needful must be done and whoever has more should be able to rise to the role of provision. By so doing, the role of the provided would not be gendered anymore. This would not imply that the beneficiary of provision is less than the other. It would rather promote mutual care between man and woman for the promotion of the human race.

Likewise, when boys are not admonished on the need to have control over their sexual desires like girls are told, the former is indirectly and unknowingly equipped with the mind-set that sexuality is part of men; invariably, such mentality fuels rape, sexual perversion amongst other kinds of deviance, and some men erroneously grow with the belief that masculinity is synonymous with prowess over sexuality. This constitutes grave injustice to men, and fertilizes the ground for social vices in the society at large.

Another gender issue raised in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* is the problem of stereotype. Most people are so comfortable with the way things are that they visibly attack any form of attempt to make a change. A popular maxim in Nigeria holds that, 'the only constant thing in life is change.' Unfortunately, it seems that many people are so hostile to change that they end up causing a ruckus when it is initiated. It is quite disturbing that people limit their dreams in life because society has tailored specific and rigid roles and aspirations for both gender categories. Adichie notes that, "an academic, a Nigerian

woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African, and I was only calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books (8). This advice from the author's acquaintance means that feminism is not part of the African culture and, therefore, she should shut her mouth and live with the socially prescribed gender roles the way they are. This goes to show that the woman is comfortable with the status quo, and prepared to resist any form of change to or a twist in laid down norms. Most people in Nigeria prefer to leave things as they are, causing the perpetuation of some retrogressive norms of the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rapidly growing changes in ideologies and epochs and the shift from physical power to intellectual might highlight the need to re-assign and re-address gender roles. However, the age-long view of gender poses a difficult problem for the society to modify, as several individuals prefer the virtue of sticking to status quo rather than actually making pragmatic alterations which align with contemporary realities.

The first step is unlearning what has been learnt over time. It is a known fact that most knowledge and things one knows about gender today come from what one has been taught during socialization or what one has experienced while growing. An individual tends to act and react to things based on what he or she has been told or past experiences. There is, therefore, need to unlearn some sexist attitudes and refresh the mind with more current knowledge. Conscious efforts should be made to ensure that the society is stripped of the mind-set that a man must be the head. Headship should not be based on gender but on some other factors such as competence, interest and merit. This is a great way of

achieving advancements in the society. Re-orientation of the mind to accommodate gender balance should be encouraged. The society should be re-built on gender equality and the provision of equal opportunities to everybody, in spite of variations in sex, race and religion. By so doing, the notion that one gender is superior to another would be made a thing of the past; gender roles would then become flexible to meet the current changes in the world.

Another step is the need to emphasize individual differences as opposed to role templates that forerun people. Every individual is born with an inherent talent which is peculiar to them. No two persons have the same destiny or mission nor the same character—there are always differences among various persons. The society should accept this and note that there is peculiarity to every individual. This way, when a man performs traditional feminine tasks and vice versa, it would be viewed as a function of individual choices. The individual should be encouraged and the achievement should not be measured based the gender. The way one may approach a task is quite different from the way another would, whether they are of the same sex or gender categories. This is what individuality preaches; thus, we should focus on what an individual has to offer rather than what the normative gender roles prescribe.

The third step is to discourage stereotypes. Adichie regrets that a feminist in Nigeria is stereotyped as follows:

You hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear makeup, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humor, you don't use deodorant. (9)

Dismissing these labels, she admonishes that one should not always stick to a retrogressive status quo in order to perpetuate custom but must try to do things differently. Innovations and inventions are

borne out of the failure or insufficiency of previous methods; thus, new ways of doing tasks should be encouraged, in spite of the expected backlash from agents of patriarchy. There is also need for individuals rendered passive by gender roles to rise to the challenge of advocating for change, with a view to helping humanity to progress. Resistance to positive social changes geared towards achieving gender equality should be discouraged—it is either one acknowledges and encourages changes or feigns ignorance and indifference to them. By so doing, one does not only stay away from inhibiting progress but also respects other person's rights and decisions to embrace a new world order. Stereotypes in gender hinders many potentials from development and effective use. Therefore, it should be discouraged.

There is also need to raise children differently from the way they are currently trained. To achieve equality and balance in gender, then conscious efforts must be made to get right the socialization processes of children, beginning from infancy. Adichie notes that the current socialization process exaggerates the differences between boys and girls. By this, she points out that there is a problem on how parents raise young ones and what the latter is made to believe. If children are raised to think less of their gender but more of their potentials and the awareness of filling up a vacuum in human race, then they could go a long way in making life worth the while and advancing the society for the benefit of everyone. For instance, Adichie raises a question, “What if both boys and girls are raised not to link masculinity and money?” (12). If this question is put into practice, it would then mark the beginning of equal pursuit of economic power by both genders. That way, man would not be the sole provide anymore but would have woman as his equal partner in provision and progress, leading

to plenty of wealth in the family. During the first and second world wars, women were highly recruited and they proved their worth in the military. If that was possible in the 20th century, it could also work now. The younger generation should be taught to think more of how to add to the society than how their gender restricts them. Gender should not be a hindrance to the contribution one should make to his or her community.

There is, importantly also, need to make some modifications in culture. One of the most common characteristics of culture is dynamism—its ability to change as time progresses, in order to accommodate new values. A culture is bound to change especially in this contemporary world marked by globalisation. However, the changeability of culture is rooted in people's conscious willingness to adjust the way they live to accommodate civilisation and progress. That way, they can equally make some modifications in their views and practices of gender roles. If the Igbo of Nigeria would adjust their culture which privileges men over women, to a focus on and accommodation of human beings, regardless of sex, then Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* will be regarded as a beneficial text that helps to extricate them of oppressive gender norms.

Many patriarchy-induced gender practices in the Igbo culture are injurious to the community and women in general. For instance, the widowhood practice which requires a woman to drink water used in bathing her husband's corpse just to prove her innocence. One is constrained to wonder why a woman would be made to take such poisonous water, even when there are no corresponding practices for men who lose their wives. Interestingly, when a woman who drinks such water die, the society gloats over her supposed guilt which resulted in the death. The proponents of

these obnoxious gender roles do not take Adichie's words into cognizance that, "culture does not make people, people make culture". Culture should be made to preserve its adherent and not to destroy them. Thus, when culture becomes destructive, it must be changed to allow for societal advancements.

To make culture to work for human beings and not the other way around; to make women live, prosper and compete healthily with men; to place merit and competence above gender roles; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her book, *We Should All Be Feminists*, admonishes everyone to embrace feminism and become feminist. This is because, according to her, the feminist tag is not an insult, but rather a label that should be embraced by all. She further offers a definition of feminism for the 21st century, one rooted in inclusion and awareness. In making feminism adorable and acceptable in the Nigerian Society, Adichie, in *We Should All Be Feminists*, steeps it in humanism, urging everyone to overlook the blackmails and stereotypes associate with the ideological movement which seeks to liberate women from the shackles of sexism and humanize them.

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