

Masculinity as a ‘hard small cage’? Reflections from Chimamanda Adichie’s *We should all be feminists*

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Abstract

With data from YouTube, this paper examines some masculinity issues raised by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TEDx talk ‘*We should all be feminists*’ and some selected interviews. She problematizes the masculine ideal of suppressing emotions and acting tough and uses them to gauge how masculinity can be described as a ‘cage’. To exemplify how this ‘cage’ might look like in reality, I draw on evidence from the literature on masculinity and men’s health as well as data from an unpublished document on discourses of fear and anxiety among male COVID-19 survivors in Ghana. Using the concept of hegemonic masculinity, I argue that the plethora of evidence in the literature suggest that (hegemonic) masculine norms indeed constrain men in ways that may have dire consequences, not only for their ego, but also for their health; hence, Chimamanda’s call to change the existing discourse is in order. Focusing on the ‘cage’ metaphor (including its qualifiers), however, I question Chimamanda’s description of masculinity since it suggests as though there is no room for contestation – something which weakens her own call for changing the narrative. The paper therefore proposes going beyond the kind of cage Chimamanda equates masculinity with, to make way for the needed interventions.

Keywords: Chimamanda; hegemonic masculinities, men and masculinities, men’s health, metaphor

Introduction

One of the cherished ideals about what it means to be a man in the research on men and masculinities in Africa is the expression of bravery, courage, or strength instead of fear, anxiety, pain, and weakness (Tseole and Vermaak, 2020; Ratele, 2008; Ndangam, 2008; Fiaveh et al., 2015). As Diabah and Amfo (2018) observe among Ghanaian men, the expression of fear is not an option for 'real' men. This is not peculiar to Africa, as some studies from other parts of the world have shown (see Ruxton and Burrell, 2020; Cassino, 2020). This raises a lot of concern since some researchers have, for example, argued about a link between masculine norms and the high percentage of COVID-19 deaths in men worldwide (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie¹ expresses a similar concern in her popular TEDx talk² titled '*We should all be feminists*' and some of her interviews following that talk. With reference to Africa, especially Nigeria, she problematizes the masculine ideal of acting tough and fearless. She argues that although masculinity has benefits for boys/men, it is also a 'cage' since it discourages boys/men from expressing their emotions like fear and admitting their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Although people continue to make references to the issues of feminism in the TEDx talk, these comments about masculinity, which make her use of the determiner *all* (i.e., both women *and* men) in her title '*We should all be feminists*' relevant, are often relegated to the background. This paper therefore examines her views on masculinity (in the TEDx talk and two of her interviews that express similar concerns) in the light of the literature on men

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, a feminist, and a public speaker based in the US. Her works touch on issues of gender, race, and identity constructions generally. Her 2012 TEDx talk '*We should all be feminists*' started a worldwide conversation about feminism and was published as a book (Adichie, 2015).

² TEDx is a grassroot initiative of TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) which aims at researching and discovering 'ideas worth spreading'. These ideas are shared through talks (both live speakers and recorded talks). With more than 3000 well organized and highly patronized events held annually, TEDx talks are considered very prestigious. (<https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/tedx-program>).

and masculinities in Africa (and beyond). To exemplify how the ‘cage’ of masculinity might look like in reality, I shall draw on evidence from the literature on masculinity and men’s health (an area which has received a lot of attention) as well as data from an unpublished document on discourses of fear and anxiety among male COVID-19 survivors in Ghana³. I pay particular attention to Chimamanda’s use of a ‘cage’ metaphor (including its qualifiers) and how this may undercut her call for changing the narrative on the suppression of emotions as a masculine ideal. In its contribution to the ongoing research on men and masculinities in Africa, the paper proposes going beyond the kind of cage Chimamanda equates masculinity with, to make way for the needed interventions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section situates the study within the literature on what constitutes masculine ideals in Africa. Further contextualization is provided in the section after that, by focusing on the literature on masculine norms and men’s health. Following this is a review of the theoretical concept (hegemonic masculinity) which underpins this study. The methods are presented after the theory. The next two sections focus on the discussion of the data, followed by their implications for masculinity research and activism. The final section concludes the study.

Ideals of masculinity in Africa

Although there may be some similarities across cultures, what constitutes masculinity is said to be culture-specific. This is because masculinity is socially and discursively constructed. As Tsang et al. (2019) rightly observe, it is fluid and context-specific, being mediated by age and social status, among other factors. From the literature on masculinities in Africa, ideals of masculinity include characteristics like bravery, resilience, self-reliance, strength, power, authority and leadership qualities,

³ This is part of a research I conducted with two colleagues (Dorothy Pokua Agyepong and Akua Asantewaa Campbell) on masculinities and men’s health, focusing on selected male COVID-19 survivors in Ghana (see also Diabah et al., forthcoming).

breadwinning competencies, the ability to offer protection, virility, and phallic competence, among others⁴ (Fiaveh, 2020; Ratele, 2008; Ndangam, 2008; Adinkrah, 2012; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng, 2011; Morrell et al., 2012). A man who does not conform to these masculine ideals or a man who engages in practices considered as feminine risks being ridiculed, sometimes with labels (e.g., man-woman) that suggest that he is not man enough.

Relevant for the discussion in this paper are the ideals of masculinity that border on bravery, strength, self-reliance, resilience, and stoicism. Adinkrah notes that:

societal notions that attribute greater mental as well as physical strength to males [in Ghana] coincide with a general cultural prohibition against men's public expression of such emotions as fear, anxiety, pain or sadness, which are interpreted as forms of weakness. Men should be physically and mentally resilient in the face of adversity and demonstrate a capacity to endure in the face of pain and suffering. It is considered unmasculine for a man to express or admit feelings of weakness and emotional dependency (2012, p.475).

In other words, a man is perceived as emotionally strong, and thus 'manly', if he can suppress his fears and anxieties and endure pain. An example of such pain-enduring acts as masculine ideals among the Xhosa of South Africa is recorded by Ndangam (2008). He notes how "the cutting of the prepuce (done without anesthetic) ... is viewed as demonstrating bravery and instilling endurance [e.g., of pain] and discipline in initiates" during circumcision (2008, p.212). Failure to be circumcised is thus a lack of bravery and endurance, and an indication of not being man enough. Among the Akan of Ghana also, the popular refrain '*ɔbarima nsu*' (a man does/must not cry) captures how emotion-

⁴ Most of these are cross-cultural ideals (see Ruxton and Burrell, 2020; Tsang et al., 2019).

reserve and stoicism are perceived as marks of masculinity (see Goodey, 1997; Ezeugwu and Ojedokun, 2020 for similar comments). Ezeugwu and Ojedokun note that such refrains (or proverbs, in the case of Nigeria) suggest that “men must be strong in the face of challenges and difficulties *irrespective of whether they have the mental capacity to do that or not*” (2020, p.2, my emphasis). Diabah and Amfo (2018, p.185) also argue that Akan proverbs like the following epitomize the height of bravery required from men in Ghana:

a. *Ɔbarima ne deɛ ɔako akɔ n’anim, enye deɛ ɔako adwane*
‘A man is he who fights to the end, and not he who fights and runs away.’

b. *Etuo to a esi ɔbarima bo*
‘If one pulls the trigger of a gun, it lands on the chest of a man.’

These proverbs suggest that what makes a man is his ability to receive the ‘bullets’ of life or fight the storms of life to the end, even if it means dying in the process. Backing down is not an option for *real men*. As one of their focus group participants (P3Y2) notes, it is “like in war ... no matter what the situation is, you continue. If you die at the warfront, you are considered as a hero” (Diabah and Amfo, 2018, p.186). As I shall be arguing later, it is for expectations such as these that Chimamanda equates masculinity with a cage. Similar instances of bravery, courage, tenacity, and resilience as marks of masculinity in Africa have been reported by Kabaji (2008, among the Luhya of Western Kenya), and Brown (2017, among South Sudanese men).

Masculinity and men’s health

Many studies have shown the impact of masculine norms on men’s health (Adinkrah, 2012; Olanrewaju et al., 2019; Ragonese et al., 2018; Tseole and Vermaak, 2020; Ruxton and Burrell 2020). Adinkrah, for example, argues that because “men are not granted an emotional expressiveness that allows them to

seek assistance with personal challenges and emotional support during crises ... gender norms and the pursuit of masculinity ideals impact suicidal behavior among Ghanaian males” (2012, p.480). His findings also indicate that anything that makes men feel dishonored, humiliated or anything that questions their masculinity has the potential of leading to suicide; after all, it is “better dead than dishonored” (Adinkrah, 2012, p.480). On their part, Tseole and Vermaak (2020) note how the Lesotho men they studied reported of resorting to harmful alcohol consumption because of the limited outlets for emotional expression (e.g., stress from their relationships with women).

In a report by Ruxton and Burrell (2020, p.6) on men, masculinities and COVID-19 around the globe, the authors argue that “men appear to be more likely to die from COVID-19 than women, according to evidence from many countries around the world”. Citing from the World Health Organization, they note that about 58% of the global deaths are males. This can be linked to both biological and social factors. On biological factors, some studies have shown that men are generally more susceptible to infectious diseases whilst women tend to have a stronger immune response (White, 2020). On social factors, and more importantly for this study, it has been argued that the social constructions of masculinity also tend to have a significant influence on men’s physical health in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020; Cassino, 2020). Based on evidence from other studies, Ruxton and Burrell argue that some men find it difficult to voice out their anxieties “for fear that this would mean showing ‘unmanly’ weakness and may experience pressure from friends to appear tough and fearless”, thereby contributing to mental health problems (2020, p.17; references to some similar studies can be found in Ragonese et al., 2018). For example, it is expected that a man infected with the virus may act tough and report late for help or probably end up dead than express his fear, anxiety, and other struggles in order to get the necessary help.

Olanrewaju et al.'s (2019) study on the influence of masculinity on health-seeking behaviors of men in a selected Nigerian university supports this (see also Heilman and Barker, 2018). They argue that the hegemonic masculine belief that men are the stronger sex (and women are the weaker sex) built into the society is an influencer of men's health-seeking behavior – admitting to sickness is a sign of femininity. As one of their participants indicated, “it is not a thing of pride for the head of the family to be going to the hospital or complaining. It is a sign of weakness ... so we pretend as if nothing is happening (SLC, 2)” (Olanrewaju et al. 2019, p.7). Such pretense, obviously, can have dire consequences. Other studies which have reported how men dissociate themselves from health-promoting behaviors because they perceive them as feminine include Gordon et al. (2013), Griffith et al. (2012) and Sloan et al. (2015).

As I shall be arguing later, sensitization programs targeted at men to help them ‘unlearn’ (difficult as it may be) some of the stringent socio-cultural norms that seem to put them in ‘a cage’ are therefore necessary. This also resonates with Chimamanda's point about teaching boys not to be ashamed of fear or expressing their emotions.

Theoretical underpinnings: Hegemonic masculinities

Connell's (1995) ground-breaking research on men and masculinities has played a critical role in many studies on men and masculinities (see Diabah, 2020; Adomako Ampofo et al., 2009; Tsang et al., 2019). Like Connell (2001), some of these studies have discussed a more complex conceptualization of masculinity (hence the term ‘masculinities’) to reflect the many possible ways of “being a man” in a particular context (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020, p.11). As Adomako Ampofo et al. (2009) also note, this has been emphasized as reflecting the diverse and complex ways in which men experience the world and, thus, perform their identities.

Key among the theory of masculinities is the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is seen as a dominant form of masculinity in a given setting (Connell 2001, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). On one hand, it encompasses patriarchy, by legitimizing and guaranteeing the dominant position of men over women (Connell, 1995; Schippers, 2007). Identities that align with this are therefore seen in Africa (and beyond) as traditional ideals of masculinity – but of course, these can be, and are often, challenged in contemporary society (see Ratele, 2008; Morrell et al., 2012; Wetherell and Edley, 1999 for similar comments). On the other hand, hegemonic masculinity also operates through the subordination of other masculinities it coexists with (e.g., gay masculinities).

While drawing on Connell's theory of masculinities, I am also aware of the fact that, a conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity from a western perspective may not fully account for its conceptualization from an African perspective (see Mfecane, 2018). For instance, in deviating from its original conceptualization, some (African) scholars have proposed diverse hegemonic masculinities depending on the context (Morrell, 2001, for example, proposes white, African and black hegemonic masculinities in South Africa). My use of hegemonic masculinity here is therefore in line with the fact that although the suppression of emotions, for example, may not neatly fall into Connell's original conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (in the two senses outlined above), it shows a certain kind of masculine ideal, which is quite dominant in Africa. In other words, the type of masculinity that is traditionally valued in Africa, as I have discussed earlier, is when a man acts in ways that position him as 'man enough' – and this includes suppression of emotion, bravery, self-reliance, resilience, stoicism, among others (see Olanrewaju et al., 2019; Adinkrah, 2012; Andoh-Arthur et. al., 2018, Fiaveh, 2020; Ezeugwu and Ojedokun, 2020; Tseole and Vermaak, 2020). Anything that falls short of the hegemonic standards are therefore marginalized.

Diabah therefore argues that hegemonic masculinity “distinguishes itself from other masculinities and establishes itself by identifying, highlighting, and celebrating certain characteristics as the true reflections of masculinity, that is, what it means to be a ‘real’ man in a given setting” (2020, p.264). Because it mortifies any potential value in other kinds of masculinities, men often dissociate themselves from these marginalized forms irrespective of their value in that context. It is against this background that I examine Chimamanda’s comment about ‘caging’ men by teaching them “to be afraid of fear” (2013, no page) and the implications of the cage metaphor, for example, in a time of crises.

Methods

Data for this study include Chimamanda Adichie’s TEDx talk titled “*We should all be feminists*”, interview with Sacha Nauta⁵ titled “*Identity, feminism and honest conversations*” and extracted interview at the 8th annual Women in the World Summit. Data collection was done in March 2021. In all, a total of 66 minutes and 43 seconds of video data were collected from YouTube and transcribed. However, only the portions that directly address the issues of masculinity in line with my research objectives (e.g., the suppression of fear, weakness, vulnerability and the expression of strength, courage, resilience, and power) were extracted for analysis in this study. I pay particular attention to the cage metaphor and the adjectives used to describe it, with the view to unpack the various nuances of Chimamanda’s arguments and the implications thereof. The study also considered three comments on the TEDx talk, as well as interview extracts from an unpublished document (see footnote 3), that align with my study objectives. The findings and discussion are presented below (boldface in the data transcript represents my emphasis).

⁵ She is the Deputy Executive Editor of *The Economist* a news agency in London (<https://mediadirectory.economist.com/people/sacha-nauta/>).

Why should we all be feminists? Perspectives on masculinities

One of the most popular talks of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie which has been widely referenced in gender circles is her 2012 TEDx talk titled "*We should all be feminists*". The major argument in this talk is the need to deconstruct the way femininity and masculinity have been conceptualized by reinforcing the goals of feminism (i.e., creating equal opportunities for both females and males). In addressing the issue of why we should all be feminists (both females *and* males), Chimamanda argues that feminism is for men as it is for women. In her interview at the 8th annual Women in the World Summit, for instance, she makes the following comments in relation to her TEDx talk:

Example 1

We need to deconstruct the way we have constructed masculinity. **Because I think it is also bad for men. I think feminism is for women *and* men. I've never believed that feminism is sort of a party just for women.** I think men have to be on board, and sometimes **there is a sadness to realizing that masculinity, even though it comes with privileges, is also a cage that limits men.** And I've lately been thinking about how about we start to use 'shame' ... **what if we taught little boys to be ashamed of things like excessive machoness; to be ashamed of not being able to express their emotions; to be ashamed of an idea of an ego?** What if we raised boys that way? In other words, just raise boys to think of masculinity as something very different from what we think about it today. (Adichie, posted 2017, no page)

In this Example, Chimamanda's reason for advocating for *all* to be feminists is because masculinity has been constructed in a way which is "also bad for men". It is no news that people have always seen men as occupying a privileged position

because of the unequal power relations that put men at the apex of the gender order – the reason for the feminist agenda in the first place. Indeed, some of the comments on Chimamanda’s post on the TEDx talk speak to this (initials of names have been used for anonymity):

Example 2

- a. DS: **The reason why men are so hostile towards feminism is because feminism seeks the end of male supremacy and male privilege.** When you have privilege, you don’t want to give it up. So you accuse the oppressed group of reverse discrimination. We men have so many privileges ... The realization that **we benefit from the structural oppression of women is too much for many of us to handle ... I’m proud to be a feminist** and to stand with women as they continue the fight for equality.
- b. TOK: if we were all feminists, men will have no rights at all.
- c. DY: males? Never heard of the expression, “Be a Man”? And do you want to pretend that not one female has ever said that to a man? Look, there’s rotten apples on both sides that unfortunately sour the whole barrel.

From Example (2a), DS mentions what is often perceived as the privileged position of men in society, i.e., “male supremacy” and female subordination. This may be equated with what has been referred to as the “patriarchal dividend” for men (Connell, 2005, p.79). On his part, TOK views this male supremacy positively and considers it as men’s “right” (2b). So, the reason why men cannot *also* be feminists is because they will lose this ‘right’ and more. These perceptions (especially from DS’ perspective) of the power relations between men and women are not only endemic in society, but they tend to cloud

our understanding of the challenges associated with masculine norms. In his response to DS' comments (and in support of Chimamanda's argument), DY, on the other hand, sees this so-called 'privilege' as no privilege at all since it constrains men. Thus, "there's rotten apples on both sides that unfortunately sour the whole barrel" (DY, 2c).

Chimamanda therefore draws attention (in Example 1) to how despite the so-called benefits, masculinity constrains men and puts unnecessary pressure on them. That is, masculinity is seen here, metaphorically, as a 'cage' that limits men (I return to the cage metaphor below). The call for all to be feminists therefore suggests that creating equal opportunities for both men and women (including our expectations and treatment of both) will take off some of the burden of masculinity – e.g., the masculine ideal of machoism (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gutmann, 1996), suppression of emotion (Ndangam, 2008; Tseole and Vermaak, 2020), among others. For instance, in explaining what it means to be a man in Lesotho, one of Tseole and Vermaak's (2020, p.4) participants describes the burden of masculinity as follows:

A man is a sheep, he does not cry. Even if you go through hardship, don't cry, don't let people know. A man is expected to be resilient and able to stand the pain in any forms of it. A man should mask his emotions and emotional experiences he goes through and should always come out as strong" (Participant 2, FGD#2).

It is for expectations such as the above that Chimamanda creates a vivid mental picture of masculinity through the cage metaphor, which I unpack in the next section.

Unpacking the cage metaphor

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, one of the senses of a cage is "a barred cell for confining prisoners"

(see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cage>). It reinforces the lack of freedom to be oneself and to do what one wishes (as illustrated in Figure 1 below, where the caged man struggles get out).



Figure 1: The metaphor of masculinity as a ‘cage’

Source:<https://www.megapixl.com/man-in-cage-stock-photo-42904374>

In its application to this study, the cage is a metaphor – this is a type of literary device in which one entity (usually abstract) is described in terms of another (usually concrete). This allows one “to paint mental pictures that appeal to our feelings and our understanding” (Agyekum 1999, p.44). The cage (as a cell for prisoners) therefore invites us to see masculine norms like emotion reserve and stoicism as constraining. Men are unable to express their fears, anxieties, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities openly as they would love to, lest they be perceived as ‘unmanly’. The image of the cage metaphor is in fact painted vividly and articulated more strongly in the following extract (Example 3) from the TEDx talk:

Example 3

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 becomes this **hard small cage**, and we put boys inside the cage. **We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask**

their true selves because they have to be ... 'hard man'.
... But by far the worst thing we do to males by making them feel that they have to be hard is that we leave them with very fragile egos. **The more hard man a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is.** (Adichie, posted 2013, no page)

In Example (3), not only is masculinity (better described here as hegemonic) conceptualized in terms of a cage, but it is described as “hard” and “small”. From the use of the adjective “small”, we see a picture of not just taking away someone’s freedom, but the ‘space’ in the cage is also small, thereby limiting further movement or freedom. Worse still, this cage is perceived as “hard”, making it difficult (or, perhaps, impossible) to break and come out of (like the double bar cage in Figure 1 above). It is worth noting, however, that Chimamanda’s use of the cage metaphor here, together with its qualifiers, is a bit restrictive since it paints a picture that suggests as though masculine norms cannot be challenged or subverted (I return to this argument in the next section).

It is an image like this that shows how we “stifle the humanity of boys”, i.e., by teaching them to be afraid of fear, weakness, and vulnerability because real men must be, or at least act, tough. Comments such as ‘man up’, ‘be a man’, *ɔbarima nsu* (an Akan refrain meaning ‘a man does/must not cry’) discourage men from being true to themselves “irrespective of whether they have the mental capacity to do that [what society expects from them] or not” (Ezeugwu and Ojedokun 2020, p.2). People would, therefore, normally hide their feelings in order to construct themselves as *men* since “signs of hesitancy or cowardice are equated with femininity and are the basis for mockery of males” (Adinkrah, 2012, p.475). This creates ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988), as men are confronted with the struggle between being themselves and fulfilling societal expectations of them. Evidence of such dilemmas can be seen in the following extract from an unpublished document on discourses of fear

and anxiety among male COVID-19 survivors in Ghana (see footnote 3; Diabah et al., forthcoming). The respondent was addressing questions on what his reactions were when he tested positive to COVID-19 and his coping strategies.

Example 4

Interviewee: **It was normal.** The feeling was okay. **There wasn't any form of fear, anxiety or anything like that ...** Three days after the confirmation, that was when **the loss of smell came; that was when a little bit of fear, errm, popped up.** ... it's one major indication to show that probably the condition is taking over your complete system. ... So, **I got a little bit scared but not so much.** So, basically, that's why **I got anxious a little bit, but not so much that it will demoralize me.**

Interviewer: ... can you tell me how you coped? What things helped you cope?

Interviewee: First of all, I must say myself. **I was so strong enough. I have personal instincts that keep me going as a man so I personally didn't take it so bad** that this is a condition that will kill me ... **I didn't say 'Oh!' or anything, there was no anxiety**

Interviewer: You said that you are very strong as a man, what did you mean by that?

Interviewee: As in, **being strong to face every situation in life. That is how I was brought up, to stand on my own and face every situation that I came across.** So, I have overcome a lot of situations that are more difficult than just having a disease condition. So, I must say that has built me up to be able to face every situation ... in our cultural setting men must be strong and are supposed to show that sense of power like **'I'm in full control of a situation' and not be demoralized.**

Interviewer: Did you ever express any worry or anxiety to anybody?

Interviewee: ... **It's still a worry to me. But I didn't, that one I didn't tell everybody** ... I even took some videos down because of that on my phone ... **so it was out of anxiety though, and fear, I must say. ... Fortunately, I didn't leave it on my status because it was at the point of probably me being scared. Not being scared too much though**

Interviewer: Did you show those videos to people?

Interviewee: **No!, no!, no!, no!**. it was after recovery that I **showed** to some people like my wife, my brother, one of my sisters and one close friend. **I didn't send** it to anybody. **I just showed it to them**

From this Example, the interviewee argued that his reaction after getting to know of his COVID-19 status was “normal”, and “there wasn't any form of fear, anxiety or anything like that”. However, in his competing (and sometimes contradictory and inconsistent) statements, he also admitted to ‘a little bit of fear’ when he realized his condition was worsening (according to Billig et al., (1988) and Edley (2001), ideological dilemmas are evident in participants’ competing arguments and tensions, inconsistencies, contradictions etc.). I am of the view, however, that this fear and anxiety were not as little as he generally presented them in the interview. Indeed, the height of his fear is evidenced in how he captured his moments of fear, anxiety, weakness, and vulnerability in videos for posterity (“so I did some videos because of that, so it was out of anxiety though, and fear, I must say” – note that he admitted to anxiety and fear here). Even though he considered the loss of smell as a worry to him, he could still not tell everybody who knew his COVID status about this worry, and I believe this is because he did not want to appear powerless or weak in their sight (note the repetitive use of “no!” with an exclamation to suggest as though this is unheard of, i.e., no one has to see him at his lowest point). The fact that he could only *show*, rather than *send*, the videos to close family and friends even after his recovery is a sign that he

did not want anyone to have evidence of his vulnerable moments (note his use of the adverb *fortunately* in “fortunately, I didn’t leave it on my status because it was at the point of probably me being scared”).

These align with Chimamanda’s argument about making masculinity appear as a cage for men, something that constrains emotional expressiveness. It is obvious that the interviewee wanted to express his fears and anxieties, but he felt constrained by societal expectations of him – hence his ideological dilemmas. For instance, he consistently mitigated his fear and anxiety through competing statements such as “a little bit scared but not so much”, “I got anxious a little bit, but not so much that it will demoralize me”, “a little bit anxiety”, “not being scared too much though”, “not so worried”. This mitigation was necessary for the kind of *real man* image he had constructed for himself. For example, he portrayed himself as a man who was brought up in a “cultural setting [where] men must be strong and are supposed to show that sense of power like ‘I’m in full control of a situation’ and not be demoralized”. He therefore considered himself as a man who is “strong to face every situation in life”, having “overcome a lot of situations that are more difficult than just having a disease condition”. Thus, he must not be seen as exhibiting fear and vulnerability, even though the struggle was real.

It is for dilemmas such as the above, and the implications thereof, that Chimamanda advocates for raising girls *and* boys in similar ways to blur the gender lines. The extract in Example (5), her interview at the women’s summit, illustrates this.

Example 5

I feel very strongly about starting very early, raising boys and girls differently, like **giving boys the language of emotions**, because we don’t ... **When a little boy falls in the playground, we don’t really hug and kiss him; we are like ‘oh get up! Be a man!’**, but when a girl falls, we are like ‘awwww!’ ... **When he falls down, give him a**

kiss, don't tell him to 'man up!' because he too maybe he wants to cry. I really feel very strongly about it. I know it sounds almost simple, but **giving men the language of emotions and starting very early will make a huge difference, and even in the rates of domestic violence.** (Adichie, posted 2019, no page)

The key point in Example 5 is allowing boys/men to express their emotions (like pain), which society has labelled as 'unmanly' and as a sign of weakness, and thus marginalized. Chimamanda indirectly draws a link between unexpressed emotions and (domestic) violence. Indeed, the literature on men, masculinities and mental health and violence suggest that the cultural prohibitions on men to express their emotions of fear, anxiety, pain, and grief contribute to their violent behavior (see Ruxton and Burrell, 2020; Heilman and Barker, 2018; Jewkes et al., 2015). Ruxton and Burrell rightly observe that men "may feel an expectation to respond to grief [anxiety, fear, among others] silently and stoically or with the limited range of emotions masculine norms typically allow men to express, such as anger" (2020, p.18), and anger can lead to violence. Jewkes et al. (2015) also argue that most of the violent behaviors exhibited by the men they studied are "rooted in expected practices or entitlements that flow from the hegemonic ideals that men should be strong, [and] tough" (p.11).

Implications of the cage metaphor for masculinities

This paper set out to examine some masculinity issues raised by Chimamanda Adichie in her popular TEDx talk (*We should all be feminists*) and some interviews following the talk. She argues that masculinity, despite its privileges for men/boys, can also be challenging since it discourages them from freely expressing their fears, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. She thus sees masculinity as a "hard small cage" (2013, no date) for men/boys. To illustrate how such a 'cage' might look like in

reality, the paper considered findings/reports from the literature (especially on men's health) that point to emotion reserve and its implications for men's health. I also considered an example extracted from my unpublished research on masculinities and discourses of fear and anxiety among male COVID-19 survivors in Ghana. The paper notes that although men may feel the need to express their emotions, they often feel constrained by societal norms to do so freely (see Diabah et al., forthcoming). For instance, the dilemmas of the interviewee in Example 4 are real when we juxtapose the heightened global fear and anxiety associated with COVID-19 infections (during the peak period when he got it) with the hegemonic masculine ideals that real men should exhibit bravery and resilience, especially in a time of crisis.

Thus, while I disagree with Chimamanda's description of masculinity (the cage metaphor) as though there is no room for contestation, there is evidence from the literature on masculinities and men's health that suggests that masculine norms indeed constrain men in ways that may have dire consequences for their ego and health. As noted earlier, some of these studies show how masculine norms are believed to be contributory factors to the high rate of male mortality in the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruxton and Burrell, 2020; Cassino, 2020). Ruxton and Burrell (2020, p.6), for example, observe that because "masculine norms expect men to be tough, stoic, and self-reliant; ... men with COVID-19 symptoms are more likely to avoid or delay seeking medical advice", including emotional and psychological support (see also Seidler, 2020; Olanrewaju et al., 2019; Ragonese et al., 2018). Some studies on masculinity and mental health have also noted that unexpressed or built-up emotions can lead to suicide (see Adinkrah, 2012; Heilman and Barker, 2018). Others on masculinity and violence have also indicated how men may channel such built-up emotions through anger and violence (Heilman and Barker, 2018; Jewkes et al., 2015).

But it is worth noting that although gender norms help to shape the attitudes and behaviors of males (and females), they do not determine such attitudes or behaviors. As Ruxton and Burrell rightly point out, “gender norms are dynamic, and they are continually contested and reformed” (2020, p.12). So, even though masculinity may be a ‘cage’, it is not too small and hard that it cannot be broken, as Chimamanda’s metaphor seems to suggest. Consequently, adult males can even be encouraged to ‘unlearn’ the norms they have been socialized into, irrespective of how difficult that may.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is necessary that efforts from policymakers aim at campaigns that demystify societal beliefs which encourage emotion-reserve and stoicism (even to the point of death) as ideals of masculinity. Thus, I agree with Chimamanda’s call for giving boys (and men) too “the language of emotions” (2019, no page) by changing the existing discourse. An effective intervention in changing the existing discourse would aim at helping boys and men to critically reflect on their gender beliefs and recognize the associated risk behaviors informed by hegemonic masculinity. The “language of emotion” should indicate that it is okay for a boy/man to cry; that it is okay for a boy/man to be afraid or feel vulnerable without being emasculated. But it must also go beyond the individual and address the issues from the perspective of the society, i.e., the people and the institutions which influence the outcomes of human actions. Again, interventions should consider the role of religious and other beliefs – that while acknowledging the significant role of the supernatural, everything (including seeking the needed emotional support, especially in crisis) should not be reduced to spirituality. Such multi-level interventions will facilitate change, not only in individual behavior, but also in social norms.

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Online data sources

Example 1:

Adichie, C. N. (2017, April 5). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie deconstruct masculinity. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_jiXvzWfAw on 20/06/2021

Examples 2 and 3:

Adichie, C. N. (2013, April 12). We should all be feminists. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc&t=5s

Examples 5:

Adichie, C. N. (2019, October 5). Identity, feminism and honest conversations. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_hsWRVR8_M&t=188s