

Gender Bias in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminist*

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Abstract:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the gender bias in *We Should All Be Feminist*. Feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. Gender bias is an unequal treatment in employment opportunity (such as promotion, pay, benefits and privileges), and expectations due to attitudes based on the sex of an employee or group of employees. Gender inequality is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and women. Some of the various gender inequality place men at a disadvantage. But in the society women are at a disadvantage in a several important ways.

Keywords: Favoritism, gender discrimination, inequality, male chauvinism, suppression.

We Should All Be Feminist is a book length essay by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in 2014. Adichie is a Nigerian novelist as well as a writer of short stories and non-fiction. *We Should All Be Feminist* is a speech which she has delivered at TedXEuston in London. Being an African feminist, Adichie shares her experiences and her views on gender construction through the essay *We Should All Be Feminist*. Gender is the major theme of this essay. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, "Gender is the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, not differences in biology" (Oxford).

In *We Should All Be Feminist*, Adichie begins her talk with a number of personal anecdotes about growing up in Nigeria. In one of these anecdotes she recalls a male friend calling her a “feminist”. Without knowing the meaning she continues to argue with him. But she knows that it is an insult. Then she offers another anecdote about her childhood in Nsukka, Nigeria. In primary school, the teacher has given a test to the students, promising that the student with the highest score would be given the title of class monitor. Even though she gets the highest score, the title is not given to her. Instead the title is given to the next highest scorer, a mild mannered boy.

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 on 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 patrolling the class with a stick. While I was full of ambition to do so. But I was female and he was male and he became class monitor.(Adichie 9)

Although Adichie knows this is unfair at that time, she does not understand that the teacher’s choice has come from her own familiarity seeing men in positions of power. Finally, when Adichie asks the teacher why she did not get the position, the teacher replied that she thinks it is obvious for a boy to get the position. She connects this incident to the broader pattern that the society happens to see men in many high positions. She further states that one of her female friends who is in America has faced gender bias in her working place. She narrates,

I have another friend, also an American woman, who has a high-paying job in advertising. She is 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 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. (Adichie 11)

Adichie also points out gender discrimination through various incidents. When a valet helps Adichie and Louis to park the car, she decides to give him a tip. When she gives him money the valet thanks her

friend Louis, but not her because, the valet assumes that any money Adichie has must come from a man. Adichie feels that what she has understood is actually not realized by others as Louis fails to understand that the valet who thanks him for the tip Adichie paid for is being sexist. Through this incident she expresses the traditional Nigerian attitudes toward gender and money.

According to Adichie, Nigeria is not the only place for sexism and money. She also states that, in united states, women are still paid less than men, and a woman with the same qualifications as a man is almost invariably paid less for the same amount of work. She also points out the worst condition of sexist wage gap through her personal experience. When she walks into the restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man not Adichie. Even though she is a regular customer to that place, the man does not consider her as a human being. She feels as if she is invisible to the waiter. Adichie cannot enter a hotel alone without a man because there assuming that she is a prostitute, and there are nightclubs to which she is accompanied by a man.

What was the name and room number of the person I was visiting? Did I know this person? Could I prove that I was a hotel guest by showing him my key card? Because the automatic assumption is that a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone is a sex worker. Because the Nigerian female alone cannot possibly be a guest paying for her own room. A man who walks into the same hotel is not harassed. The assumption is that he is there for something legitimate. (Adichie 10-11)

This very justifiable anger fuels her argument that unfair expectations are placed on women and their behaviour in and out of the economic field.

According to Adichie, however sexism does not begin or end in the workplace. Unknowingly it is taught by the parents to their children. Masculinity is defined by the people in a very narrow way. The boys are learnt that being a man means being *macho*. They are taught to behave as a strong and powerful man. It also means that disrespecting women and expecting the women to do all the household works including cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Adichie says these traditional gender roles are part of Nigerian culture just as they are in the United States. She argues that enforcing such gender roles are harmful to both

men and women. Simone de Beauvoir says that gender-equality is harmful to both female and male. She says, “Girls are weighed down by restrictions, boys with demands - two equally harmful disciplines” (Beauvoir)

Adichie further says that the narrow definition of masculinity teaches men not to feel or even cry, making their egos very fragile. In turn, women are taught to cater to the fragile egos of men and to value their own needs less than the needs of the men in their lives. For an example, if a woman happens to make more money than her husband, she is encouraged to lie about it in public. Because this lie can not emasculate him. In Nigeria men can do whatever they want, but the society asks the women to be silent. So Adichie writes that “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are” (Adichie 14).

Even Adichie states that if there is a family meeting, she is not allowed to participate in it, because she is a woman. Even though she is interested in social gatherings she is not allowed to mingle with them because of her gender. These incidents helps her to speak about gender discrimination. The essay *We Should All Be Feminist*, highlights the theme of gender bias. As Adichie faces gender problems in her life, she explores her experiences in her essay. Though the society grants men and women equal rights, gender discrimination remains.

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