

excerpt from *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2012.

[pg38]

I am trying to unlearn many lessons of gender I internalized while growing up. But I sometimes still feel vulnerable in the face of gender expectations.

The first time I taught a writing class in graduate school, I was worried. Not about the teaching material, because I was well prepared and I was teaching what I enjoyed. Instead I was worried about what to wear. I wanted to be taken seriously.

I knew that because I was female, I would automatically have to *prove* my worth. And I was worried that if I looked too feminine, I would not be taken seriously. I really wanted to wear my shiny lip gloss and my girl skirt, but I decided not to. I wore a very serious, very manly and very ugly suit.

The sad truth of the matter is that when it comes to appearance, we start off with

[pg39]

men as the standard, as the norm. Many of us think that the less feminine a woman appears, the more likely she is to be taken seriously. A man going to a business meeting doesn't wonder about being taken seriously based on what he is wearing—but a woman does.

I wish I had not worn that ugly suit that day. Had I the confidence I have now to be myself, my students would have benefitted even more from my teaching. Because I would have been more comfortable and more fully and truly myself.

I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity. And I want to be respected in all my femaleness. Because I deserve to be. I like politics and history and am happiest when having a good argument about ideas. I am girly. I am happily girly. I like high heels

[pg40]

and trying on lipsticks. It's nice to be complimented by both men and women (although I have to be honest and say that I prefer the compliments of stylish women), but I often wear clothes that men don't like or don't 'understand'. I wear them because I like them. The 'male gaze', as a shaper of my life's choices, is largely incidental.

* ~ @ ~ *

Gender is not an easy conversation to have. It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable. Both men and women are resistant to talk about gender, or are quick to dismiss the problems of gender. Because thinking of changing the status quo is always uncomfortable.

[pg41]

Some people ask, ‘Why the word *feminist*? Why not just say that you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?’ Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general—but to choose to use the vague expression *human rights* is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that.

[pg42]

Some men feel threatened by the idea of feminism. This comes, I think, from the insecurity triggered by how boys are brought up, how their sense of self-worth is diminished is *they* are not ‘naturally’ in charge as men.

* ~ @ ~ *

Other men might respond by saying, ‘Okay, this is interesting, but I don’t think like that. I don’t even think about gender.’

Maybe not.

And that is part of the problem. That many men do not actively *think* about gender or notice gender. That many men say, like my friend Louis said, that things might have been bad in the past but everything is fine now. And that many men do nothing to change it. If you are a man and you walk into a restaurant

[pg43]

and the waiter greets just you, does it occur to you to ask the waiter, ‘Why have you not greeted her?’ Men need to speak out in all of these ostensibly small situations.

Because gender can be uncomfortable, there are easy ways to close this conversation.

Some people will bring up evolutionary biology and apes, and how female apes bow to male apes—that sort of thing. But the point is this: we are not apes. Apes also live in trees and eat earthworms. We do not.

Some people will say, ‘Well, poor men also have a hard time.’ And they do.

But that is not what this conversation is about. Gender and class are different. Poor men still have the privileges of being men, even if they do not have the privilege of being wealthy. I learned a lot about systems

[pg44]

of oppression and how they can be blind to one another by talking to black men. I was once talking about gender and a man said to me, ‘Why does it have to be you as a woman? Why not you as a human being?’ This type of question is a way of silencing a person’s specific experiences. Of course I am a human being, but there are particular things that happen to me in this world because I am a woman. This same man, by the way, would often talk to me about his experience as a black man. (To which I should probably have responded, ‘Why not your experiences as a man or as a human being? Why a black man?’)

So, no, this conversation is about gender. Some people will say, ‘Oh, but women have the real power: bottom power.’ (This is a Nigerian expression for a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men.) But

[pg45]

bottom power is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person’s power. And then what happens if the man is in a bad mood or sick or temporarily impotent?

Some people will say a woman is subordinate to men because it’s our culture. But culture is constantly changing. I have beautiful twin nieces who are fifteen. If they had been born a hundred years

ago, they would have been taken away and killed. Because a hundred years ago, Igbo culture considered the birth of twins to be an evil omen. Today that practice is unimaginable to all Igbo people.

What is the point of culture? Culture functions to ensure the preservation and continuity of a people. In my family,

[pg46]

I am the child who is most interested in the story of who we are, in ancestral lands, in our tradition. My brothers are not as interested as I am. But I cannot participate, because Igbo culture privileges men, and only the male members of the extended family can attend the meetings where major family decisions are taken. So although I am the one who is most interested in these things, I cannot attend the meeting. I cannot have a formal say. Because I am female.

Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture

* ~ @ ~ *