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WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS

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Introduction

This is a modified version of a talk I delivered in December 2012 at TEDxEuston, a yearly conference focused on Africa. Speakers from diverse fields deliver concise talks aimed at challenging and inspiring Africans and friends of Africa. I had spoken at a different TED conference a few years before, giving a talk titled ‘The Danger of the Single Story’ about how stereotypes limit and shape our thinking, especially about Africa. It seems to me that the word *feminist*, and the idea of feminism itself, is also limited by stereotypes. When my brother Chuks and best friend Ike, both co-organizers of the TEDxEuston conference, insisted that I speak, I could not say no. I decided to speak about feminism because it is something I feel strongly about. I suspected that it might not be a very popular subject, but I hoped to start a necessary conversation. And so that evening as I stood onstage, I felt as though I was in the presence of family – a kind and attentive audience, but one that might resist the subject of my talk. At the end, their standing ovation gave me hope.

We Should All Be Feminists

Okoloma was one of my greatest childhood friends. He lived on my street and looked after me like a big brother: if I liked a boy, I would ask Okoloma's opinion. Okoloma was funny and intelligent and wore cowboy boots that were pointy at the tips. In December 2005, in a plane crash in southern Nigeria, Okoloma died. It is still hard for me to put into words how I felt. Okoloma was a person I could argue with, laugh with and truly talk to. He was also the first person to call me a feminist.

I was about fourteen. We were in his house, arguing, both of us bristling with half-baked knowledge from the books we had read. I don't remember what this particular argument was about. But I remember that as I argued and argued, Okoloma looked at me and said, 'You know, you're a feminist.'

It was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, 'You're a supporter of terrorism.'

I did not know exactly what this word *feminist* meant. And I did not want Okoloma to know that I didn't know. So I brushed it aside and continued to argue. The first thing I planned to do when I got home was look up the word in the dictionary.

Now fast-forward to some years later.

In 2003, I wrote a novel called *Purple Hibiscus*, about a man who, among

other things, beats his wife, and whose story doesn't end too well. While I was promoting the novel in Nigeria, a journalist, a nice, well-meaning man, told me he wanted to advise me. (Nigerians, as you might know, are very quick to give unsolicited *advice*.)

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.

So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist.

Then 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. (Which amused me, because much of my early reading was decidedly unfeminist: I must have read every single Mills & Boon romance published before I was sixteen. And each time I try to read those books called 'classic feminist texts', I get bored, and I struggle to finish them.)

Anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself a Happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men.

Of course much of this was tongue-in-cheek, but what it shows is how that word *feminist* is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear make-up, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humour, you don't use deodorant.

Now here's a story from my childhood.

When I was in primary school in Nsukka, a university town in south-eastern 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. If you were class monitor, you would write down the names of noise-makers each day, which was heady enough power on its own, but my teacher would also give you a cane to hold in your hand while you walked around and patrolled the class for noise-makers. Of course, you were not allowed to actually *use* the cane. But it was an exciting prospect for the nine-year-old me. I very much wanted to be class monitor. And I got the highest score on 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 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.

I have never forgotten that incident.

If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations.

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

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.

I love being back home in Nigeria, and spend much of my time there in Lagos, the largest city and commercial hub of the country. Sometimes, in the evenings when the heat goes down and the city has a slower pace, I go out with friends and family to restaurants or cafés. On one of those evenings, Louis and I were out with friends.

There is a wonderful fixture in Lagos: a sprinkling of energetic young men who hang around outside certain establishments and very dramatically 'help' you park your car. Lagos is a metropolis of almost twenty million people, with more energy than London, more entrepreneurial spirit than New York, and so people come up with all sorts of ways to make a living. As in most big cities, finding parking in the evenings can be difficult, so these young men make a business out of finding spots and – even when there are spots available – of guiding you into yours with much gesticulating, and promising to 'look after' your car until you get back. I was impressed with the particular theatrics of the man who found us a parking spot that evening. And so as we were leaving, I decided to give him a tip. I opened my bag, put my hand inside my bag to get my money, and I gave it to the man. And he, this man who was happy and grateful, took the money from me, and then looked across at Louis and said, 'Thank you, sah!'

Louis looked at me, surprised, and asked, 'Why is he thanking me? I didn't give him the money.' Then I saw realization dawn on Louis's face. The man believed that whatever money I had ultimately came from Louis. Because Louis is a man.

Men and women are different. We have different hormones and different sexual organs and different biological abilities – women can have babies, men cannot. Men have more testosterone and are, in general, physically stronger than women. There are slightly more women than men in the world – 52 per cent of the world's population is female but most of the positions of power and prestige are occupied by men. The late Kenyan Nobel peace laureate Wangari Maathai put it simply and well when she said, 'The higher you go, the fewer women there are.'

In the recent US elections, we kept hearing of the Lilly Ledbetter law, and if we go beyond that nicely alliterative name, it was really about this: in the US, a man and a woman are doing the same job, with the same qualifications, and the man is paid more *because* he is a man.

So in a literal way, men rule the world. This made sense – a thousand years ago. Because human beings lived then in a world in which physical strength was the most important attribute for survival; the physically stronger person was more likely to lead. And men in general are physically stronger. (There are of course many exceptions.) Today, we live in a vastly different world. The person more qualified to lead is *not* the physically stronger person. It is the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more creative, more innovative. And there are no hormones for those attributes. A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, innovative, creative. We have evolved. But our ideas of gender have not evolved very much.

Not long ago, I walked into the lobby of one of the best Nigerian hotels, and a guard at the entrance stopped me and asked me annoying questions – 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