

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

# Africa Needs Feminism

She needs no introduction at home or internationally. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a true African icon of our times. Not only is she one of Africa's literary greats, she is an icon the world has come to love and respect for her fortitude in speaking openly and fearlessly on issues ranging from the portrayal of Africa through the global lens, to gender roles and feminism. The Nigerian author of the bestselling *Half of Yellow Sun* is on record for stating that she is a "happy feminist".

Feminism and gender disparity was the focus of her keynote speech at the acclaimed global phenomenon – TedxEuston – held in London in December. She spoke to *New African Woman's* Belinda Otas.



The F-word always ignites strong reactions, but more so in the African women's movement and some other circles that view feminism with unease, or even derision, as being "un-African". But as one of Africa's foremost daughters, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes a rallying call – Africa needs feminism.

"We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them, to be macho! Then we raise our women to cater to our men's fragile egos. Why should a woman's success be intimidating to a man? A man who would be intimidated by me is a man I will have no interest in. Why do we put so much effort into preparing women for marriage, but not the same for men?" she wonders, cramming in as many comments as she can as if aware of the rather brief interview session that *New African Woman* has been allocated with her in the environs

of the successful TedxEuston event. Throwing light on her own philosophy, she explains in a tone of guiding authority: "The problem with gender is that it prescribes who we should be instead of recognising who we are. Imagine how much freer we would be if we did not have to live under the weight of gender expectations. Culture does not make people; people make culture. A feminist is a man or a woman who says there's a problem with gender and we must fix it."

The award-winning author, who has so far given us *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus*, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and coming soon, the eagerly-anticipated *Americanah*, has just been speaking to an appreciative audience at TedxEuston, which also featured many other notable names such as the founder of Leap Africa, Ndidi Nwuneli, director of the International Development Centre, Alcinda Honwana, Queen Sylvia Nagginda

Luswata of Buganda and human rights activist Albie Sachs.

TedxEuston in London is run by public-health expert Ike Anya as part of the TED series of events which provide a platform for innovative speakers on the challenges facing Africa. Its mission is "to reflect ideas and inspired thinking of a new generation of African thinkers and leaders".

## A captivated audience

The excitement at Chimamanda's presence was clear along the corridors of the conference venue, and as she delivered her speech, which she punctuated with anecdotes of her

**"A feminist is a man or a woman who says there's a problem with gender and we must fix it."**

## Women's Month Special

personal experiences in life, the captivated audience received it with sighs of “aaahs” and “a-ha’s”. Time past so quickly that some were heard to mutter that they were hungry for more.

It was clear that in just those short moments on the podium, Chimamanda had managed to move the audience (both male and female) out of their comfort zones as she aptly and pointedly highlighted the issues of gender inequality that continue to contribute to the political, social, economic and cultural subjugation of women, and the challenges which that subjugation poses for Africa. Her presence at the event (which had many other speakers and a packed programme) couldn't fail to challenge conventional wisdom. And in her trademark conversational style, Chimamanda's delivery was effortless.

In our interview later I asked what she considers to be the most important priority if Africa is to create a healthy discourse on the issue of gender advancement: feminism, gender inequality or how Africans raise their children?

“Whenever I'm asked which one is most important, I'm like all of them are important,” she says. “What I care about, which, we just need to... I don't like the way we raise women [girls] in Africa in general. I think it's about raising them differently. I think that is really important.

“Because of the way they are raised is why you see that some women can be highly accomplished and educated, but have a lot holding them back. They have internal issues because of things that they have learnt growing up. For example, that's why you will find that a woman who owns a house in the US, or anywhere else for that matter, and is 39 years old, decides one day that she wants to get married so is going to sell her house!”

Feminism and gender disparity are not subjects that Chimamanda has suddenly taken on. In an interview with R. Krithika in *The Hindu* in 2009, she said: “My attitude to feminism is this: I am a happy feminist. I think all fair-minded people should be. Sometimes it becomes a problem of word-choice, as many people have come to associate feminism with hairy women burning bras and so don't want to be

called feminists, even though they believe in the basic idea of feminism: that while men and women have their biological differences, those differences should not be used as a reason for any political, economic or social disadvantaging of women.”

In the same year, in a separate interview in *Bookslut*, she reaffirms her “happy feminist” label and adds: “I'm very interested in gender and how it affects life choices, just how gender affects things, and I think it does to a large extent.” And who can forget her seminal speech on *How Will History Depict The African Woman?* delivered at the inaugural Royal African Society Literary festival? In that speech she focused on the need for all Africans to speak up for themselves, but more so African women.

She stressed then: “The (African) woman is more than merely an object but an (individual) with her own desires.” However, the ultimate test of her commitment to keep exploring how gender shapes our world, and attitudes to women, is best demonstrated in her characters, especially that of Kainene, Olana's twin sister in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The book won the Orange Prize for Fiction and tells the story of the Nigerian civil war.

In a society where patriarchy is still rife and women are burdened by attitudes that want to marginalise them further – in spite of their progress in the corridors of power, social and economic advancement and the continuous growth of the African women's movement – it cannot be denied that the relationship between and among women also plays a crucial role. Nowhere is this more prominent than how women can become competitors for the affection of men.

When this is put across to her, Chimamanda reiterates once again: “How we are raised – that thing where we are raised to compete with one another for the attention of men. You know there is a lot of undoing that needs to be done. I think it is too late for us (laughs), I really do, but I'm hopeful for the future.

“When I say the future, I mean those who are born today, I don't mean like us, and the basis for my faith and hope is that I realise how much of all of this is construction. We are not born

**“While men and women have their biological differences, those differences should not be used as a reason for the disadvantaging of women.”**



**The many faces of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: an inspirational speaker, role-model and novelist**

like this, we are made like this. So for me, we can unmake it and if I were to have children, it's very clear to me and also my nieces and nephews the way I deal with them, it's clear how I do it. I don't do that gender bullshit. I don't do if you are a girl, you have to think other girls are competition for you and you have to be fake to get a man. Just be yourself and there are actually good men in the world (laughs).”

Achieving excellence is one way Chimamanda says African women can



SIDDHARTH KHAJURIA



**Our favourite Chimamanda quotes from her TedxEuston speech**

**"It is with the same audacity that Adichie would go on to say the following..."**

**"A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent and creative."**

**"Gender as it functions today is a great injustice."**

**"We define masculinity in a narrow way."**

**"What if boys and girls were raised not to link money to masculinity?"**

**"By far the worst thing to do to a man is by saying they have to be hard, is that we leave them with fragile egos."**

**"Why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage but don't teach men the same?"**

**"A woman in our society at a certain age, who is not married, is made to feel a sense of deep failure."**

**"We praise girls for virginity but don't praise boys for virginity."**

address gender challenges as they continue to reposition themselves in attitude and approach as more women come to the fore in their fields of endeavour.

"The higher you go, the fewer women there are," she says. This has sometimes created an atmosphere where women shy away from telling their own success stories: "There are so many women like that, we have to be apologetic, tone it down and the sad thing is, it's not because men are bad. It's a horrible structure that we are in, but we can change it in little ways. Excellence is very important and I often say to women, the answer is excellence. You can and you need to show that you can."

Chimamanda has always been one who shines light on what is positive about Nigeria and Africa and in the same fashion tells *New African Woman* that what currently excites her about the younger generation of African women is, "First, there are so many beautiful women with natural hair and that excites me, and I had to say that because it matters, because there is a new confidence we have and it's saying, 'this is us, this is what we look like and I'm not going to try and be what I'm not', and I love that. I think it's fantastic. It's my generation and sort of youngish African women." However, she admits that it is a mixed affair because "on the one hand, women are advancing and doing better at work but on the other hand, there is the obsession with getting married, which I just think is awful."

With her new book, *Americanah*, due to be published in April, which explores the lives of Africans in America (diaspora), what can her readers expect? "I'm excited and also a



bit nervous. It's very different, different from what I have done. The thing about writing a book is that you don't know what is going to happen. So there is the uncertainty of it and I have to plan how I'm going to deal with it. I might say to myself, I'm not going to read any reviews, I'm going to do yoga and all that, but I'm also excited. I wrote about hair and I'm actually very interested in hair. I wrote about race, immigration and about love. Almost everything I do is about love and I hope people will connect to it."

A conversation with Chimamanda would be incomplete without asking her thoughts on how she sees Africa and feminism creating a workable relationship? Particularly given the number of times it has been said that feminism is un-African. So does Africa need feminism?

"Of course," she says. "Many women, African women, shy away from it for many reasons. I mean we don't have to... if somebody chooses not to call it feminism, it's fine for me. It is just awareness that things are not okay and we can do better."

Asked if African women can fight the equality battle without a label that is mainly associated with western culture, Chimamanda says: "We don't need a label but it's easier when you give something a name because you have something to build and rally around and something for people to stand on. I don't think we need to call it feminism. I call it feminism. Remember I started by going around and trying to make it African feminism, a softer, cultural feminism but I was, like, bullshit, I'm a feminist and I get to define it the way that I want. So I don't have any concerns about my white feminist friends."

"There is always a generational difference but I do think we need it. Women need to step up, and men too, and here is the thing - I don't think feminism is for women only, it's for men and women and that is the way we're going to change things." ■

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie will be at the London Southbank on 9 April 2013. Americanah is published in the same month by Fourth Estate.**



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