

NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURAL NORMS AND FEMINIST IDEALS IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S '*WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS*': LESSONS FOR NIGERIAN FEMINISTS

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ABSTRACT

The global movement of feminism has sought to challenge systemic gender inequalities and patriarchal structures. However, its application within specific cultural contexts remains a subject of critical discourse. Chimamanda Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* has emerged as a significant text within contemporary African feminist thought, particularly in Nigeria, where traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded. This paper examines the intersection between cultural norms and feminist ideals, analyzing how Adichie's arguments navigate the tensions between global feminist narratives and indigenous gender expectations. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as liberal feminism, intersectional feminism, and cultural relativism, the study explores how Adichie critiques gender discrimination in Nigeria while advocating for a localized approach to feminism. The analysis highlights key themes including gender socialization, economic empowerment, and the role of men in feminist advocacy. Furthermore, the study discusses the challenges faced by Nigerian feminists in adapting feminist principles within deeply patriarchal structures and religious traditions. Finally, the paper argues that while Adichie's work aligns with global feminist ideals, it offers critical lessons for a culturally sensitive and context-specific feminist movement in Nigeria. The findings emphasize the need for an inclusive feminist framework that engages both local traditions and global discourses to promote gender equality effectively.

Keywords: Feminism, Chimamanda Adichie, cultural norms, feminist movement, gender

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a global movement which has evolved to address the systemic inequalities and patriarchal structures that affect women globally. However, the interpretation and application of feminist principles vary across different cultural contexts (Bhandari, 2024; Parry, 2020; Kiguwa, 2019). In Nigeria, where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, feminism often encounters resistance due to cultural and religious norms that define women's roles in society. Chimamanda Adichie has emerged and contributed significantly to contemporary feminist discourse, particularly in African contexts and presents a compelling argument for gender equality while acknowledging the cultural and social realities that shape gender relations in Nigeria and beyond (Adichie, 2014). Adichie's work is particularly relevant in a globalized world where feminist ideals are increasingly shaped by Western narratives. While global feminism promotes universal gender rights, local feminist movements must navigate the intersection between international feminist ideals and indigenous cultural expectations. This raises critical questions: To what extent can Nigerian feminists adopt Adichie's perspectives while remaining sensitive to local cultural values? How does '*We Should All Be Feminists*' help in reconciling feminist aspirations with societal expectations? And what lessons can

Nigerian feminists draw from Adichie's work to create a more inclusive and context-specific feminist movement?

This paper explores these questions by analyzing *We Should All Be Feminists* within the context of Nigerian cultural norms and global feminist discourse. It examines how Adichie's work challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for a feminism that is both inclusive and adaptable to local realities. The study also considers the influence of globalization on feminist activism in Nigeria, stressing the potential tensions between imported feminist ideals and indigenous gender advocacy. In doing so, this paper aims to provide insights into the ways Nigerian feminists can effectively engage with Adichie's arguments while contextualizing feminism in a way that resonates with local traditions and values. By drawing lessons from Adichie's work, this study contributes to the broader discourse on feminist strategies that bridge global and local perspectives, ultimately fostering a more nuanced and impactful feminist movement in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on liberal feminism, intersectional feminism, and cultural relativism, while also considering the impact of global feminism versus localized feminist movements. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Adichie's work navigates the complex intersection between cultural norms and feminist ideals in a globalized world, offering practical lessons for feminist advocacy in Nigeria. Liberal feminism, rooted in the principles of individual rights, equality, and legal reform, serves as a primary lens for analyzing Adichie's arguments. Liberal feminists advocate for equal opportunities in education, employment, and political participation, emphasizing legal and policy changes as mechanisms for achieving gender equality (Tong, 2009). Adichie's perspective aligns with liberal feminist thought, particularly in her argument that gender roles are socially constructed and that both men and women should challenge these norms to create an equitable society. This study examines how Adichie employs liberal feminist principles while adapting them to the Nigerian context.

Intersectional feminism, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), highlights the interconnected nature of gender, race, class, and other social identities in shaping women's experiences. In Nigeria, where gender discrimination intersects with factors such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, feminist advocacy must account for these complexities. Adichie's work recognizes these nuances by acknowledging how cultural expectations and economic structures disproportionately affect Nigerian women. This study utilizes intersectional feminism to explore how Nigerian feminists can address gender inequalities in a way that reflects the country's diverse social landscape. On the other hand, cultural relativism argues that beliefs and practices should be understood within their cultural contexts rather than judged against external standards. Critics of global feminism often contend that Western feminist ideals are imposed on non-Western societies, disregarding indigenous gender dynamics (Mohanty, 1988). Adichie's work straddles the line between advocating for universal feminist principles and acknowledging the cultural particularities of Nigerian society. This paper examines whether *We Should All Be Feminists* successfully navigates this balance or whether it risks imposing a Western-centric feminist narrative.

Global feminism seeks to promote gender equality worldwide, often driven by international human rights frameworks and transnational feminist activism. However, local feminist movements must contend with unique sociocultural and political realities. Nigerian feminism, for instance, must address issues such as patriarchy reinforced by religious doctrine, communal

family structures, and economic disparities. This study explores the extent to which Adichie's advocacy aligns with global feminist ideals while also providing insights that are relevant and actionable for Nigerian feminists.

ADICHIE'S *WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS* IN CONTEXT

Chimamanda Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* is a powerful work that redefines and contextualizes feminism within contemporary society, particularly in Nigeria. The work serves as both an introduction to feminist thought and a critique of gender inequality rooted in cultural and societal norms (Nartey, et al, 2023). Adichie's approach is accessible, blending personal experiences, social analysis, and historical perspectives to advocate for a more inclusive and equitable world. In this seminal work, the key arguments involve the normalization of gender discrimination, the role of language and socialization, the need for inclusive feminism, economic and professional barriers, and marriage and power dynamics. Adichie presents a compelling case for gender equality by examining the systemic nature of gender discrimination and the socialization processes that sustain it. Her arguments blend personal experiences, cultural analysis, and a call to action, making feminism accessible to a broad audience.

On the aspect of normalization of gender discrimination, Adichie noted how gender discrimination is deeply ingrained in Nigerian society, often accepted as a natural and unquestionable reality. Recounting personal experiences such as being overlooked for leadership roles in childhood because she was a girl, Adichie illustrates how these biases begin early and the experiences shape the self-perception of both men and women, conditioning them to accept male dominance as the norm. She also critiques the way certain discriminatory practices are justified through cultural and religious traditions. For instance, women are often expected to tolerate abusive relationships because societal norms dictate that a woman's primary role is to sustain her marriage at all costs (Adichie, 2014; Madhani, et al, 2017). By normalizing these injustices, society perpetuates gender inequality across generations. Further, Adichie's argument demonstrates the power of language in shaping societal attitudes toward gender. She explains how boys and girls are raised with different expectations, influencing their aspirations and behaviours. Girls are taught to be submissive, humble, and accommodating, while boys are encouraged to be assertive, ambitious, and dominant. For example, phrases like "boys will be boys" excuse aggressive male behaviour, while "a woman must know her place" reinforces the idea that women should not challenge male authority (Adichie, 2014; Sumra, 2019). Adichie calls for a shift in the way we talk about gender, advocating for language that empowers rather than limits individuals based on their sex.

In addition, Adichie dispels the misconception that feminism is synonymous with misandry (hatred of men) or that it is a Western import incompatible with African values. She argues that feminism is about justice and equality, emphasizing that men also benefit from dismantling restrictive gender norms (Adichie, 2014). She notes that many men feel pressured to conform to unrealistic expectations of masculinity, suppressing their emotions and avoiding roles deemed "feminine." By embracing feminism, society can create a healthier environment where both men and women have the freedom to pursue their aspirations without fear of societal backlash. Also, Adichie explores marriage and power dynamics demonstrating how societal expectations around marriage reinforce gender inequality. Women are taught that their greatest achievement should be finding a husband, while men are encouraged to view marriage as a secondary aspect of their lives (Sumra, 2019). Adichie critiques the power imbalance in many marriages, where women are expected to cater to their husbands' needs while sacrificing their

ambitions. This dynamic, she argues, stems from cultural norms that equate masculinity with dominance and femininity with submission. By redefining marriage as an equal partnership rather than a hierarchical institution, Adichie suggests that both men and women can have more fulfilling relationships.

ADICHIE'S CRITIQUE OF NIGERIAN CULTURAL NORMS

Adichie's critique of Nigerian cultural norms is central to her feminist advocacy. While challenging the deep-seated patriarchal traditions that shape gender roles, Adichie argues that these norms are neither natural nor unchangeable but are instead socially constructed and reinforced over time. Hence, the perception of feminism as a foreign concept, and the role of religion in reinforcing patriarchy, toxic masculinity and male privilege defines Adichie's critique of Nigerian cultural norms.

One of the biggest challenges Nigerian feminists face is the belief that feminism is a Western ideology incompatible with African traditions (Adichie, 2014). Many critics argue that gender roles in African societies are dictated by culture and that challenging them means rejecting African identity. Adichie refutes this by pointing out that African societies have a history of strong, independent women who play active roles in governance, trade, and leadership. She cites historical figures such as Queen Amina of Zazzau and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti as examples of African women who defied gender norms. Thus, feminism is not about adopting foreign ideals but about reclaiming the right of women to participate fully in society, just as they historically did before colonialism and other external influences reinforced patriarchal structures (Adichie, 2014).

Furthermore, religious institutions play a significant role in shaping gender roles in Nigeria. Many interpretations of religious texts emphasize male authority and female submission, making it difficult for women to challenge oppressive norms. Adichie calls for a more progressive interpretation of religious teachings, one that promotes gender equality rather than justifying discrimination. She argues that religious faith should not be used as an excuse to deny women opportunities or justify gender-based violence. However, Adichie also critiques the rigid expectations placed on men. In Nigerian culture, masculinity is often equated with strength, dominance, and emotional suppression (Adichie, 2014). Men are discouraged from expressing vulnerability, leading to unhealthy relationships and societal issues such as gender-based violence. By encouraging men to embrace feminism, she suggests that both men and women can benefit from dismantling oppressive gender norms and calls for a redefinition of masculinity, one that allows men to be nurturing, expressive, and supportive partners rather than figures of authority and control.

THE GLOBAL FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND ADICHIE'S CONTRIBUTION

Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* has a profound impact on global feminist discourse presenting feminism in a clear, accessible, and engaging manner and contributing to a broader understanding of gender equality that resonates across different cultures. The work has been widely embraced, influencing discussions on feminism in both Western and African contexts. The book has been translated into multiple languages, used in academic settings, and even distributed to high school students in Sweden as part of their curriculum on gender equality (Wagner, 2015). Adichie's work bridges the gap between African and Western feminist

movements by highlighting the universality of gender discrimination while also emphasizing cultural specificity, challenging the notion that feminism is a one-size-fits-all movement, advocating for localized feminist approaches, and bringing African perspectives into global feminist discussions, ensuring that African women's voices are represented.

The work has also sparked debates, particularly within African feminist circles. Some criticisms include class bias, lack of intersectionality and simplification of feminist struggles (Kalu, 2023). Adichie's feminism primarily reflects the experiences of middle-class, educated women and does not adequately address the struggles of poorer women, especially those in rural areas. While she acknowledges gender inequality, she does not always explore how other factors such as class, ethnicity, and disability intersect with gender discrimination. Her approach, while accessible, simplifies the complexities of feminist activism and does not fully account for the systemic and structural barriers to gender equality. Despite these critiques, Adichie's contribution to feminism remains significant. She has made feminist discourse more mainstream, particularly in Africa, and has inspired a new generation of young feminists to challenge societal norms. Her ability to blend personal storytelling with feminist theory has made her one of the most influential voices in contemporary gender discourse.

CULTURAL NORMS AND GENDER IN NIGERIA

The historical perspectives on gender roles in Nigeria date back to pre-colonial gender roles when gender roles in many Nigerian societies were more flexible than they are today. Women played active roles in trade, governance, and community decision-making. In some ethnic groups, such as the Igbo and Yoruba, women held significant economic power as traders and market leaders. The Yoruba had the institution of the *Iyalode*, a powerful female political figure, while the Igbo had the *Omu*, a queen-like female authority in market governance. However, patriarchy, or male dominance in social, political, and economic spheres, is a defining characteristic of today's Nigerian society.

Within this society, there is a stigma around single and independent women. Single women, particularly those who are economically independent, often face societal scrutiny (Budgeon, 2015). Women who delay marriage to focus on their careers are sometimes labelled as "wayward" or "too ambitious." Widows, on the other hand, are often subjected to harmful widowhood practices, such as being forced to prove their innocence in their husband's death. Often, there are cultural justifications for gender inequality. Many gender norms are justified through cultural sayings and proverbs that reinforce male authority. For example: "A woman's place is in the kitchen" suggests that women should focus on domestic responsibilities. "A man is the roof of the house" implies that men are the primary decision-makers. "A woman without a husband is like a tree without roots" reinforces the idea that marriage defines a woman's identity. These sayings contribute to the persistence of gender inequality by framing male dominance as natural and unchangeable.

Furthermore, religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping gender norms in Nigeria (Paramallam, 2006; Tuki, 2024). Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions all have interpretations that influence societal attitudes toward gender. In Islamic communities, interpretations of *Sharia* law often reinforce male authority in marriage, inheritance, and leadership. However, some progressive Islamic scholars argue for gender justice within Islamic teachings. In Christian communities, biblical passages that emphasize male headship in marriage are often used to justify women's subordination. However, some Christian movements advocate for gender equality, citing Jesus' inclusive treatment of women.

Traditional African religions often include female deities and priestesses, but they also uphold patriarchal structures in governance and inheritance.

While religious institutions have historically reinforced patriarchy, they can also be powerful platforms for feminist advocacy. Some faith-based organizations in Nigeria promote gender justice by challenging harmful interpretations of religious texts and advocating for women's rights (Adamu & Para-Mallam, 2012). Social institutions, including schools, the media, and workplaces, often reinforce gender norms. The media portrays women primarily in domestic roles, while men are shown as leaders and professionals. Workplaces often have discriminatory policies, such as maternity leave without paternity leave; reinforcing the idea that childcare is solely a woman's responsibility.

While the landscape of feminist activism in Nigeria is changing, there are progresses as well as challenges. In recent years, there has been growing advocacy for gender equality in Nigeria (Olonade, et al, 2021). Feminist movements, social media activism, and legal reforms have contributed to increased female participation in education and the workforce, a growing number of women-owned businesses, and greater awareness of gender-based violence and efforts to combat it. Despite progress, challenges remain, Resistance from traditional institutions, which continue to promote patriarchal values; Lack of enforcement of gender-equality laws, making legal protections ineffective, and Backlash against feminism, with critics arguing that it threatens Nigerian cultural values. However, younger generations, particularly through social media activism, are challenging traditional gender norms. Technology is also providing women with greater access to education, entrepreneurship opportunities, and political engagement, suggesting that the future of gender equality in Nigeria is evolving in a positive direction.

LESSONS FOR NIGERIAN FEMINISTS

The intersection between cultural norms and feminist ideals in Nigeria presents both challenges and opportunities for gender equality advocacy. As Nigerian feminists navigate the complexities of advocating for gender equality in a deeply patriarchal society, Adichie's perspectives provide valuable lessons for engagement, resistance, and transformation. This section explores key takeaways from her work and their implications for the Nigerian feminist movement.

The Need for Context-Specific Feminism

One of the key lessons from *We Should All Be Feminists* is the importance of grounding feminist advocacy in local cultural, social, and economic realities. While feminist movements globally share common goals, Nigerian feminists must consider the unique challenges posed by Nigeria's patriarchal traditions, religious beliefs, and colonial legacies. Adichie's emphasis on cultural sensitivity reveals that feminism must be adapted to different social contexts. She argues that while gender equality is a universal goal, advocacy strategies must reflect local histories and customs (Adichie, 2014). Nigerian feminists, therefore, must balance progressive ideals with cultural sensitivities to avoid alienating potential allies. A common criticism of feminism in Nigeria is that it is seen as a Western import that contradicts African values. Adichie challenges this notion, asserting that the demand for gender equality is not exclusive to the West. However, Nigerian feminists must take care to frame their arguments in ways that resonate with local audiences, using indigenous feminist traditions, historical examples, and

culturally relevant narratives. Further, rather than outright rejecting cultural traditions, Nigerian feminists can engage with traditional institutions - such as market women's associations, religious groups, and local councils – to promote gender-inclusive reforms. This approach helps to make feminism more palatable to wider audiences, including conservative communities.

Addressing Gender Socialization and Education

Adichie emphasizes that gender inequality is not just about laws or policies but is deeply embedded in the way children are socialized. From an early age, girls are taught to conform to traditional gender roles, while boys are encouraged to assert dominance. Addressing this issue is crucial for the feminist movement in Nigeria. Adichie critiques how society raises boys and girls differently, reinforcing expectations that limit female potential. Nigerian feminists can use this insight to push for reforms in parenting practices, advocating for gender-neutral child-rearing approaches that encourage both boys and girls to be independent, ambitious, and compassionate. Gender biases are often perpetuated through school curricula that reinforce stereotypes about men's and women's roles (Tuki, 2024). Nigerian feminists should advocate for the inclusion of feminist literature and gender studies in school curricula, textbooks that portray women as leaders, innovators, and professionals, and the promotion of STEM education for girls to break traditional career barriers. In addition, many religious teachings reinforce patriarchal gender norms. Nigerian feminists must engage with faith-based institutions to promote gender-equitable interpretations of religious texts. Collaborating with progressive religious leaders can help shift harmful narratives that depict women as subordinate to men.

Economic Empowerment as a Tool for Feminism

Economic dependence remains one of the major barriers to gender equality in Nigeria. Adichie highlights the financial disadvantages that women face, arguing that economic empowerment is a crucial step toward true gender equality. Women in Nigeria are often paid less than men for the same work, especially in the informal sector. Nigerian feminists can push for transparent wage policies in public and private sectors, legislation enforcing equal pay for equal work, and greater unionization among female workers to demand fair wages. Often, women face significant barriers to accessing credit, business funding, and market opportunities (Adamu & Para-Mallam, 2012). Nigerian feminists can advocate for gender-sensitive financial policies that improve access to loans and investment opportunities, promote mentorship programs for female entrepreneurs, and support initiatives that encourage women to enter male-dominated industries. Thus, to create an equitable work environment, Nigerian feminists should push for workplace policies such as paid maternity and paternity leave, workplace anti-harassment policies, and flexible work arrangements to support working mothers. Economic empowerment enables women to make independent life choices, reducing their vulnerability to domestic violence and exploitation.

The Role of Men in Feminism

Adichie argues that feminism should not be framed as a movement against men but as a movement for equality that benefits everyone (Adichie, 2014). Nigerian feminists can adopt this approach to create more inclusive advocacy efforts and challenge toxic masculinity. Many Nigerian men are socialized to believe that their masculinity is defined by dominance and control over women. Nigerian feminists can promote alternative models of masculinity that emphasize emotional intelligence, cooperation, and respect for women. They may engage male influencers, religious leaders, and traditional rulers in conversations about gender equality.

They may organize workshops that teach boys about healthy expressions of masculinity. Also, encouraging Male Allies in Gender Advocacy creates a healthy environment for all. Men hold significant political and economic power in Nigeria, making their involvement in feminism crucial. Nigerian feminists should encourage male politicians and business leaders to champion gender equality policies, create programs that educate men on the benefits of gender equality, and highlight successful partnerships between men and women in leadership. Nevertheless, some Nigerian men resist feminism because they perceive it as a threat to their status. Feminists can address this resistance by showing how gender equality benefits men as well, such as through healthier family dynamics and economic stability.

Moving from Awareness to Policy Action

While Adichie's work raises awareness about gender issues, awareness alone is not enough. Nigerian feminists must translate feminist ideals into concrete policies and legal reforms (Tuki, 2024). First, strengthen legal protections for women. Despite existing gender equality laws, enforcement remains weak. Nigerian feminists should push for the full implementation of the *Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act*, advocate for laws ensuring equal political representation for women, and demand harsher penalties for gender-based violence and discrimination. Second, increase women's political participation. Women's representation in Nigerian politics is among the lowest in Africa. To address this, feminists must support female candidates through mentorship and campaign funding, advocate for gender quotas in government positions, and educate voters on the importance of electing women leaders. Third, Strengthen Feminist Movements. For feminism to succeed in Nigeria, the movement must be strong and united. Nigerian feminists should build coalitions across different sectors, including academia, media, and grassroots organizations. They should utilize social media to amplify feminist messages and organize nationwide protests and advocacy campaigns to push for policy changes.

Surely, Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* provides Nigerian feminists with a powerful framework for advancing gender equality. By adopting a culturally sensitive approach, focusing on economic empowerment, engaging men as allies and pushing for policy reforms, Nigerian feminists can create lasting change. While the road to gender equality in Nigeria remains challenging, the insights from Adichie's work offer a clear roadmap for moving forward.

CONCLUSION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* serves as an essential contribution to feminist discourse, particularly within the Nigerian context. The study highlights how Adichie's arguments provide a nuanced perspective that bridges the gap between global feminist ideals and cultural realities in Nigeria. By critiquing entrenched gender norms, advocating for inclusive feminism, and emphasizing the importance of economic empowerment, Adichie presents a framework that is both aspirational and practical for Nigerian feminists. The intersection of feminism and cultural norms presents both challenges and opportunities for gender equality advocacy. Nigerian feminists must navigate societal resistance, religious interpretations, and economic disparities while advancing their cause. As this paper has shown, adopting a culturally sensitive approach that engages traditional institutions, reshapes gender socialization, and fosters male allyship is crucial for the movement's success. Moreover, translating feminist awareness into tangible policy actions, such as legal reforms and increased female political participation, remains imperative for long-

term impact. Despite persistent patriarchal structures, there is growing momentum toward gender equality in Nigeria, driven by feminist movements, social media activism, and legal reforms. By leveraging insights from Adichie's work, Nigerian feminists can foster a more inclusive and adaptable feminist movement, one that resonates with local traditions while embracing universal principles of gender justice. In doing so, they can contribute to a transformative shift in societal perceptions and structures, ultimately paving the way for a more equitable future.

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