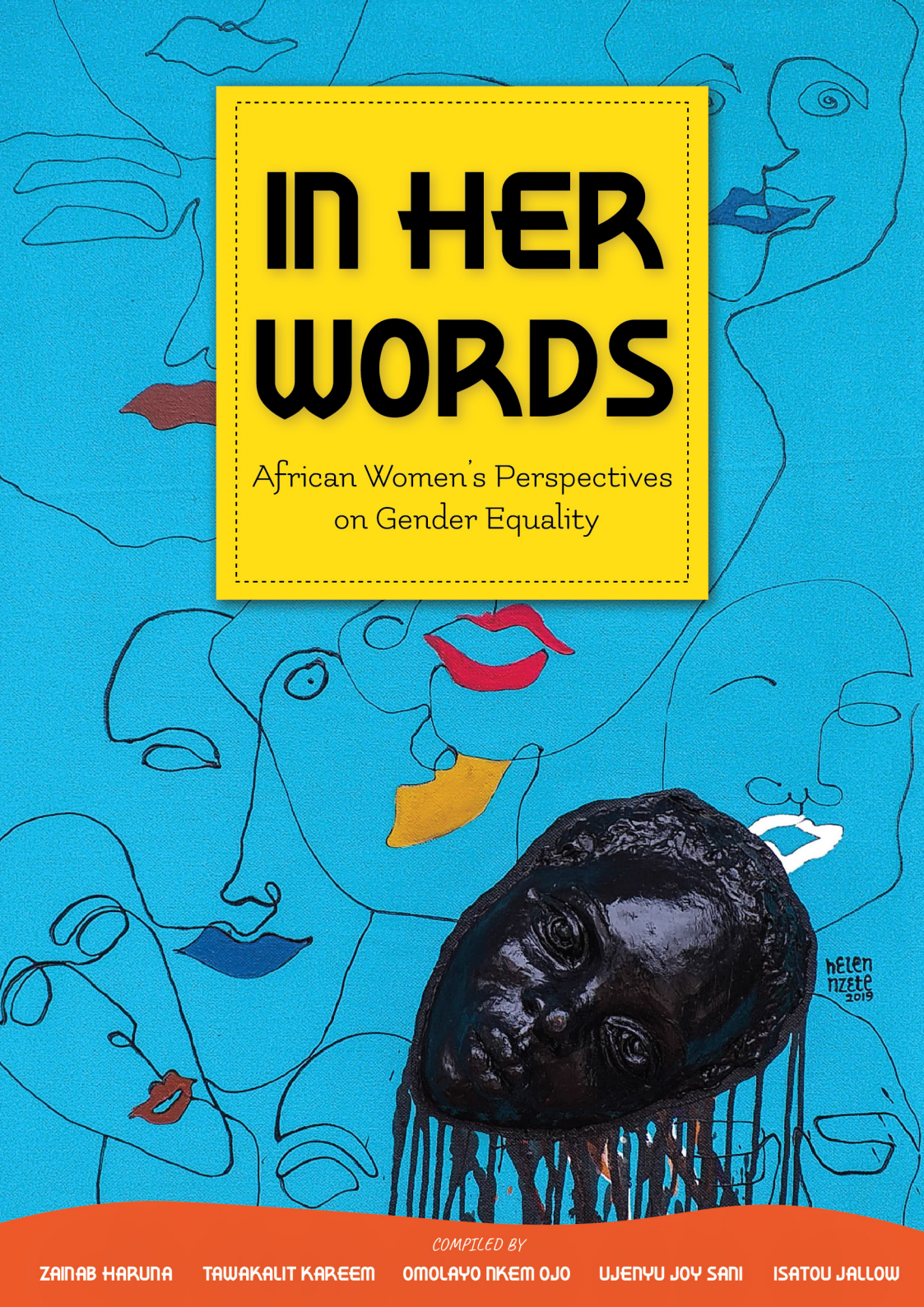

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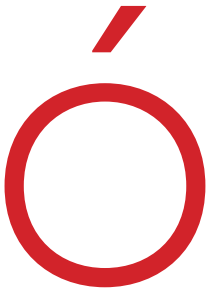


PRAISE FOR 'IN HER WORDS'

Reading essays in this anthology shows how connected we all are as girls and women in our varying but united experiences.

Anuli Ola-Olaniyi
Founder of Heir Woman

When it comes to amplifying conversations that concern, impact, and affect girls and women with bias to Nigerian women, In Her Words anthology will play a very vital role.

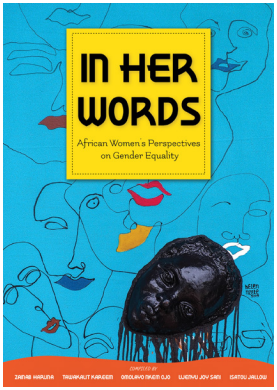
Blessing Timidi Digha
Feminist, Researcher, Advocate and, Storyteller

Reading the first story in the 'In Her Words' Anthology and I am having so many emotions because the patterns of behaviour that uphold and excuse oppression, no matter how subtle are so recurrent in everyday life.

Sadiya Ochekliye
Children's rights advocate, Lawyer and Writer

The authors' beautifully narrated stories, distinctive yet similar, help disentangle a matter that is already simple, but which the world for some reason chooses to complicate.

Kunle Adebajo
Investigative Journalist and Non-fiction Editor, Agbowó



In Her Words

African Women's Perspectives on Gender Equality

COMPILED BY

Zainab Haruna

Tawakalit Kareem

Omolayo Nkem Ojo

Ujenyu Joy Sani

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This compilation is a love letter to African women, and a missive to all the other souls who will come across it and give space in their hearts and minds for the varying outlooks and experiences that are contained herein.

But these are not just stories. From Kenya and Nigeria to Sierra Leone and Senegal, the words in this compilation are a mirror that reflects the lived experiences of African women in different countries across the continent.

While reading through the entries, it occurred to us that so much had changed about the realities of African women and the many ways they show up in the world, but in the same vein, so much had stayed the same.

In recent times, feminism has been lauded as a Western concept, an idea that is often leveraged to denigrate contemporary African feminists and the critical work that they do to further the cause of women and girls and promote gender equality in their countries and spaces.

But as history will show us, feminism is anything but 'unAfrican'. In March 1923, the Egyptian feminist Huda Sharaawi founded the first national feminist movement in Egypt and called it *al-Ittihad al-nisa ĩ al-misri*, the Egyptian Feminist Union. The Union fought for the equal participation of women in politics including the right to vote, the rights of girls to an education, targeted healthcare for women and girls, and the reform of family law.

After years of activism, primary education was mandated for girls as well as boys in 1925 and Egypt granted women the right to vote in 1956.

The Nigerian feminist and women's right activist, Margaret Ekpo, was a force of nature who was instrumental to the

assimilation of women into the political landscape in Eastern Nigeria particularly, equal rights to education, the need for women on corporate boards, in addition to specific developmental markers for women in her Eastern region of Nigeria. In January 1959, alongside Janet Mokelu, Ekpo was one of the first two women appointed as a Special Member to the Eastern House of Chiefs.

Across the length and breadth of Africa, women fought for the nationalist ideals of their countries from colonial rule and simultaneously rallied against a system that posited them as second class citizens in the new order that was being worked towards.

While reading through the submissions, it was easy to weave a thread through similar themes in the experiences of women across the continent including but not limited to incessant gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, lack of access to formal education, and economic sidelining.

But it is not all gloom.

The threads of sisterhood, resilience, digging for better and quite frankly, refusing to accept only what society deems as sufficient for you was palpable through these different stories. We saw how women from generations past created better for themselves even without the buffer of formal education that more of us have today.

And so we know that it is our responsibility as African feminists in this day to elongate these threads, to push for more equitable societies where women can thrive without having to leap through hurdles that exist solely as a result of their gender.

The different works in this compilation open windows into a world that the writer is asking you to explore. It is our hope that you will take your time to immerse in these worlds and feel through them.
If we're lucky, perhaps you'll come away with some new questions about feminism, and answers to some of the old.

Thank you.

Zainab Haruna and Tawakalit Kareem.

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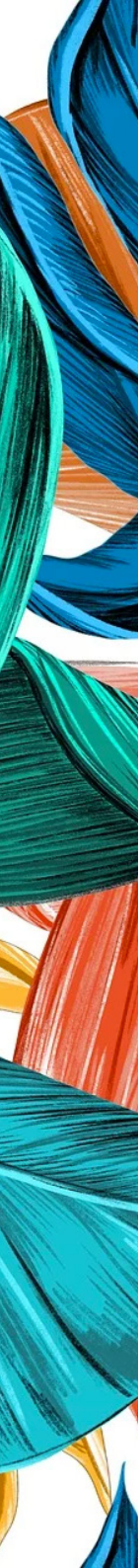

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We are immensely grateful to everyone that contributed to this project to make it a reality.

A big thank you to all the contributors for sharing their important writing with us for this. We appreciate the thought and diligence that went into crafting your submissions.

Our special appreciation goes to Helen Nzete, for giving us permission to use her art “Generations 2” as the cover art for this project as it resonates deeply with the message of this body of work.

To Agbowó for working with us to publish this important piece, we say thank you.

To all our families and friends that supported us on this journey, we cannot thank you enough.

Our biggest appreciation goes to all the amazing women, in Africa and all over the world who are doing the hard work of creating space, for themselves to be respected, their voices heard and their work seen. We appreciate the work you do in paving the way for generations of women yet unborn.

We did this for you.

- Omolayo Nkem Ojo, Tawakalit Kareem, Zainab Haruna, Isatou Jallow and Ujenyu Joy Sani (The Compilation Team)

For Women

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You'll often hear people say, "well, you're helping women find their voices." I fundamentally disagree with that because women don't need to find a voice, they have a voice. They need to feel empowered to use it and people need to listen.

- Meghan Markle

01 When We Talk of Freedom:

Hijabs, Respectability and What it Actually Means To Be Free

Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu

[I]

It's November. When night falls, harmattan spills into the room through the window. I'm sitting on the bed, one leg hanging off the edge, the other folded in front of me. I have my laptop in front of me and I should be working on a submission I hope to make before the night ends, but I am on the phone with a new friend. We've been discussing poetry, friendship; the common tunes that our hearts sing to. There is laughter in which I throw my head back and slap my thigh repeatedly, and I have to struggle to catch my breath. There is a fond dissecting of what home entails; I tell him how, against Warsan Shire's advice, I have built homes out of people.

As the night crawls on, my new friend and I begin to sail on waters unfamiliar to our friendship: marginalization and intersections; stereotypes; religion; the notion of belonging. Because I am learning to carry myself more carefully even during conversations, I hesitate to delve into matters like this (doing so invariably leads to recounting stories of oppressions suffered). To revisit oppression is to invoke the

pain that accompanies it and so, I try so hard not to.

Our conversation begins to revolve around the things I hate to talk about, and the atmosphere tenses up. Eventually, I'm in the thick of it. When I say, 'but you know there's been a constant marginalization and ill-treatment of Muslims all around the world, right?', he disagrees. And this is when, for the first time this evening, I am speechless. I think about concentration camps in China where Muslims are treated like people with mental illness. I think about the Niqab ban in France. He says, 'I don't think it's like that'.

I am reminded immediately of Jodi Picoult's *Small Great Things*. In the book, Ruth, the protagonist black nurse is barred from attending to the newborn baby of a white couple who are both open white supremacists with a very strong movement to push forward their agenda. The husband has the logo of this movement tattooed on his head and arm. When he goes to speak with the head nurse about not wanting Ruth to attend to his child, he casually displays his tattoo as an unspoken threat to her. First, she freezes. Then, she complies.

The couple have the head nurse pin a card to their baby's file that reads 'no African-American nurse allowed to attend to this patient'. Ruth narrates her shock at the glaring racism to her white colleague; the latter meekly suggests that perhaps it isn't racism at all. She says something along the lines of 'I don't think it's like that. I don't think they meant it that way'.

[II]

I'm telling my friend about that day I sat next to a woman in a classroom of secondary school students. We had gone to speak to them about career paths. I had felt my veil sliding off my head from behind and kept

readjusting it, simply assuming: that it was the wind doing the pulling; or, perhaps, that I had mistakenly sat on it as it was quite long. And so, began the cycle of adjusting my sitting position, trying to pull my veil forward to my forehead, then adjusting my sitting position again, and pulling the veil forward again. But the pulling from behind persisted until finally I turned around to see what the problem was. I found the woman who sat next to me, pulling my hijab from my head. I turned to face her, thoroughly confused and too stunned to talk. My chest choked with all kinds of emotions too heavy and fast for time's pace. I started to talk but I was so flustered no words would come out. So, I sat there staring at her, just staring and waiting for an explanation. She said in a low, patronizing tone, her smile bordering on the motherly side, 'you'll look better without it, take it off.'

I felt my head spin but told myself *'chill'*. I wanted so badly to ask, 'how disrespectful can you get?'. Wanted to ask, 'where did you get your audacity from?', because I truly wanted to know. But somehow, I managed to succeed in reminding myself that she was older—old enough to be my mother in fact. And yet, I couldn't not say anything. As respectfully as my rage could allow, I said, 'Madam, that thing you just did to my veil, you will not do it again.' She stared at me as though shocked that I did not cower, smile meekly, or go silent with shame. She looked like she had heard a cat bark. And in that instant, I understood two things: oppression is always, always intentional. Oppression does not exist in a vacuum, it exists to serve the demarcation between the superior and the inferior, no matter how faulty such a demarcation was. And the demarcation there was a piece of clothing, a veil.

Back at home that day, I couldn't shake off the feeling of inadequacy, of not telling her off more sternly. Strangely, as I sat seething with all the

anger not properly disposed, it occurred to me that it wasn't the sheer disrespect of her attempting to pull my veil away that hurt most. Yes, that hurt. But mostly, what was painful was the look on her face when I spoke; it was her shock that seemed to say 'wow, I didn't know you had the ability to talk back. You are inferior, not human enough. How come you know to speak?'

When I finish recounting this experience to my friend, he says, 'I don't think it's like that. People just don't understand this hijab thing.'

This comment hits me in all sorts of ways and I immediately wish I hadn't told him the story. I think about the many things I do not understand about other people's faith and even personal choices, and how it hasn't crossed my mind to ask them invasive questions, treat them with disrespect, or attempt to pull their clothing away in public. Because I am both angry and hurt, I walk away from the conversation.

I go on Twitter sure I'd find something funny. There is a trending video of a woman. The caption tells me it is not something I want to watch, so I scroll past it. But it appears many more times. My timeline is filled with people sharing it and all the captions are enraged. Finally, I click on it. There is a woman sitting in what looks like a conference hall, surrounded by security personnel. She's evidently about to undergo questioning. She is dressed as a northerner; full Ankara complete with the scarf, and then a large veil over it. When she realizes the media people present are making videos of her with their phones, she attempts to cover her face with the veil. There is a lady standing in front of her. She has on a rude look. She's either part of the police and dressed in mufti, or part of the media. She attempts to yank the woman's veil off, and this is when I know I should stop watching. But I don't. In retrospect, perhaps I had hoped

that somewhere along the line, someone would stop her from committing this act of violence, or maybe I had wanted to see just how far the human capacity to inflict shame as an injury could run. The woman with the veil is startled, she tries to hold on to the veil, but the lady isn't done yet. The lady keeps yanking it, she throws the woman around even as the woman struggles to pull herself away. She throws the woman around with disgust so vile it has sauntered into anger; even as the woman screams, 'You will not treat me like this. You will not do this to me, I am a citizen of this country.' She continues throwing her around, even as the woman crouches near a chair, conquered but still trying to salvage what is left of her dignity. The lady finally succeeds in pulling off the veil. She pulls off the scarf, too, to reveal the woman's hair and that is when the woman begins to cry. It's when I begin to cry, too. Her wail is filled with so much anguish and I know I will be hearing it in my head for quite some time. I've seen oppression, I've seen dehumanization, but I'd never quite seen such brokenness televised.

[III]

Two weeks before this incident, I arrive in Ibadan, way-worn, wearing a knee-length hijab. I have spent hours on the road travelling here. I am here for the Ebedi Writers Residency located at Iseyin, Oyo State. It begins today and I am excited at the prospect of having a quiet space to write in for 5 weeks.

When I get into the bus bound for Iseyin, all eyes turn to me. I know that look, have known it all my life. And so, I do not worry about it. I plug my

earpiece into my ears, allow the music to sail me away from the present.

An hour into the journey, my phone rings and it is my father. Our conversation shifts between Nupe and English. When I subconsciously switch to English, I notice a collective shock in the bus. The other passengers all turn to look at me. I am so shocked by the behavior that I stop talking mid-sentence. I tell my dad I will call him back when I arrive. There is a bit of shame muddled in my anger. I feel it like a stain.

It could have been my hijab; it could have been the henna butterflied on my hands and feet. It could have been both. But these people very clearly did not expect that I'd know how to speak English. And I know I shouldn't have stopped talking; I know the shame shouldn't be mine to feel because it is not I who has been offensive. But still, it is there.

Someone asks me randomly, 'You are from the north?'. My first impulse is to not answer because I am already angry. And if I answered yes and he went the usual way of ignorant Nigerians—who insist on the stereotypical assumption that all northerners are illiterates and backwards—and proceeded to ask 'how come you speak English so well?' it would upset me even more.

But I nod and keep my eyes on him. Daring him to go on and say it. He doesn't. He doesn't say anything at all.

When I tell my best friend about this through a WhatsApp voice-note later that day, she responds, relaying a similar experience. When she first arrived in China for school, she wore a short hijab to class. She got the stares. The professor, in an attempt to make her first day at school lively for her, asked her pleasantly if she'd like to stand up and sing. My best friend loves to sing. And so, she did. After the class, a fellow Nigerian in class

who was Igbo and recognized home in her accent and appearance, came towards her and asked brightly, 'where are you from?'. Also recognizing the accent too, she answered, 'Nigeria'. And this young man asked, 'what part of Nigeria?'. 'North', she told him, and that was when his face fell. First, the incredulous stare. Then, the derision. And then, 'enh? you are from the North? And you speak English? Like, you not only know how to speak English, you know how to sing too? This is surprising oh!'

I laugh, because the alternative is anger. Anger is exhausting, and I am tired.

At the residency, I meet Nkemjika. We have been friends on Facebook for years but it's the first time we are meeting. We are both surprised to see each other, and we hug.

The day after, we have to go to the market. I wear a hijab; a pink *khimar*. I notice her staring disapprovingly, it strikes me as both funny and disrespectful, but I say nothing. Still, I go back inside my room to assess myself again in the mirror to make sure there's nothing wrong; that the colors in my outfit aren't in sharp contrast or that there isn't a fashion blunder. I examine my shoes. I take them off and wear another pair. I am fidgeting. I'm aware that I am beginning to bend, but somehow, I can't help it. I sit back on the bed, feeling small. It is the same feeling of smallness as when I'm packing to travel from home; I find myself automatically reaching for shorter *khimar*, and more veils. Or when, once, my mother was traveling to Singapore and I took out all the *khimar* in her bag and replaced them with light, short veils. Because I did not want anyone to stare at her unduly or make her feel uncomfortable. Veils are more tolerated.

Eventually, I step back out and Nkemjika and I head out. On the way, we

talk about all the things writers talk about. We talk about Chimamanda Adichie and Wole Soyinka. We stop at an ATM gallery and there is a long queue. Another Muslim lady stands a few steps away from the queue, alone. She has on a long hijab as well as a niqab. I'd notice in the coming days that there are many such Muslims here.

A few weeks before my residency, a Muslim woman living in the US had said on Twitter that it was important for Muslims to not shun one another when they see each other in public. She spoke of how important it was to at least offer a smile if not say hello when you meet a Muslim woman wearing full hijab and niqab, because these are the ones who feel the heaviest ostracism in communities. At the time, I did not see what she was going on about; I even felt that she was being dramatic. But as I stand with Nkemjika, looking at this woman as she stands apart from the queue, with people throwing her those familiar stares, I suddenly understand what the woman on Twitter meant.

I say *Salamu alaikum* to her. When she turns to me and responds, there is surprise in her voice. But there is also a smile.

Nkem stares at the woman's outfit, and then at me again. In my head, I'm saying *'don't say it, don't say it'*. She begins to talk about the first time she saw a woman in niqab and how scared she was. I sigh. Because I know where this conversation is going and have no interest in following it there, I do not say anything. Regardless, the conversation gets there on its own. She says, 'you Muslim women need to get your freedom sha. Make una free unasef'.

I feel slapped. I fix my eyes on her, genuinely surprised at the myopic reasoning behind the comment. She does not explain further. But because she's both a poet and a friend, I engage her, 'wetin concern freedom,

concern hijab? How can you tell from a person's appearance that they need freedom?'

I ask because I feel this is finally an opportunity to understand why many people seem to think this way. She looks away, says nothing. I sigh heavily.

A few days later, another co-resident, Remi, knocks on my door. I have been sitting in front of my computer for a long time now and so when I stand up to go to the door, I stagger a bit as though inebriated. This is when I realize I am hungry. I open the door and she wants to know if I'd like some noodles as she's about to cook some for herself. I find it very kind and I accept. As I am about to go back inside, she asks while touching my scarf—a gesture I am slightly shocked by—in a way that leaves no doubt in my mind that her next question is what has really brought her to my door, 'Why do you keep covering your hair with *this thing* even when you are in the house? Don't you feel hot under it? You should take it off. Free yourself.'

Again, that word. *Free*. I sigh, and I stare at her. I stare because she has on a wig and is beating her head lightly with a palm in the way women do when their hair is itching and they cannot scratch, or when said hair is humid. What I have on is a light piece of scarf draped on my head very loosely. I am not beating down on it. I consider her question again, and then I look at her wig again which she's still beating down on in discomfort. Without meaning to, I begin to laugh.

'Maybe I don't want you to see my hair? Maybe habit? Maybe my hair is old, and I don't want to do you the inconvenience of having to look at it? Maybe, maybe, maybe?'

She smiles uncomfortably and this is when I decide the new approach

with which I will begin answering questions like these.

When I come back inside my room, I sit back in front of my laptop and return to writing. One line in, I am thinking about the subterranean reasoning of those questions about freeing myself. I ponder on the fluidity of the concept of freedom, the frequency with which its definition shifts, depending on the faith of the person being observed, and how ostensible is the observer's concern, which when looked at closely, reveals a wide array of contempt, sheer ignorance, and the illusion of righteous superiority.

I realize the only times I have felt my freedom slipping from me are times when I wear less clothing than I want to, when I wear a short hijab when what I really want to wear is a long one. When I bend because I do not want to be thought of as other, or oppressed, or inferior.

I am on the phone again with an old, dear friend, talking about hijab and ignorance and prejudice. He is saying people should learn to ask questions about beliefs they do not understand so as to lessen the possibility of their being judgmental. He means well. But I do not agree.

Recently, I told myself I would not honour any form of engagement with anyone of a different faith asking questions about my personal religious choices, no matter how respectfully the questions are asked, or how seemingly well meaning. It stresses me. The way I see it, when you ask me a question about the basis of my personal choice and religious decisions, when you ask me to explain the ideology behind my belief, or my dressing, you are asking—whether consciously or not, whether you admit it or not—that I make a case for myself on why you should respect those choices. But to do that will be to first agree that you have the right to think lowly of me and are, therefore, entitled to an explanation for why you shouldn't. You certainly do not have the right.

And so, when I'm faced with vague yet condescending questions like 'aren't you hot under that?', I find myself offering responses that challenge the logic behind such questions, or answers explicable by ordinary logic. This takes the conversation away from myself and redirects it to the other person and their reasoning. This is always a better alternative.

At the end of my residency, I travel to Lagos to visit my close friend and course-mate, Ruka. When she comes for me at the park, we hug each other and scream. As though the attention we get from passers-by isn't enough, Ruka lowers her head over the pedestrian bridge we're walking over and screams to the chaotic bustling road, 'Hauwa is in Lagos!'. I sigh, then laugh.

We are two young women of the same faith—one wearing a wig, and the other a veil, walking the streets of Lagos and holding hands. We are screaming above the noise of passing vehicles and humans, as though all the things we want to talk about cannot wait until we get to our destination, as though our lives in this instant are dependent on this moment. We are laughing like actual witches. And I am thinking this is what it means to be free.

I'm not sad but the boys who are looking for sad girls always find me.
I'm not a girl anymore and I'm not sad anymore.
You want me to be a tragic backdrop so that you can appear to be illuminated, so that people can say, "Wow, isn't he so terribly brave to love a girl who is so obviously sad?"
You think I'll be the dark sky so you can be the star?
I'll swallow you whole.

- Warsan Shire

02 Everyday Feminism

Amanda Marufu

It is only when all black groups, join hands and speak with one voice that we shall be a bargaining force which will decide its own destiny."

– Winnie Mandela, 1976

During the past few months, I have experienced one of the highest peaks of my career. I have gotten to speak to more influential people and usually in most spaces, the following happens:

Man: *Does something sexist*

Also man: You know, I have no idea why women hate men.

I have a variety of sexist experiences. From having late-night meetings where, as the only woman present, I am asked whether my husband has given me permission to be on a call that late. To being on a set doing a job which I have organized and having my male colleague be automatically deferred to as the one in charge or even being given the credit for my work.

Yet time and time again, more men ask why women hate

men. It's easy for me to give a simple answer. For me, the answer is simple. From the time of my birth, I have lived through abuse and violence at the hands of men.

I watched my father hit my mother before walking out on us forever. I was raped by a family member and a boyfriend then punched by another boyfriend, and all this was before the age of 21.

Yet, I believe the reality is more nuanced than that and the biggest pain and anger stems from the daily nuances. Anger from being ignored or constantly assumed to be lower and less powerful. Anger from having your ideas stolen or having a man casually say your own words back to you whilst simultaneously telling you to dream bigger because you have so much potential. Anger at being excluded, given fewer opportunities even when you work ten times more, anger at being automatically assumed to be less than.

This sexism is a dangerous sexism. This sexism is ingrained in many of us, men and women alike. This sexism can be subconscious like when people automatically assume the man is a doctor and that the woman is a nurse. This sexism is in our television, in marketing, in our education systems, and books. Yet even as I'm able to acknowledge this I must first acknowledge that I am privileged.

"African Feminism does not exist in opposition to western feminism."

My feminist journey began online. Nothing was more exhilarating than realizing that I had finally found an identity. One simple word that could encompass all that was within me.

Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes.

My mind was completely amazed at the simplicity of it all. Equality could solve so much. In an equal world both men and women could be free to love and express emotions without shame or fear. Both men and women could live and work within the roles that best suited them. Free to choose, to love, to have passions, dreams. Feminism to me was magic. Imagine it, this simple act could mean less abuse, no wage gap, reproductive rights, maternity and paternity leave, equal pay and so much more.

But what does this mean for Feminism on the African Landscape?

When you learn about feminism especially online you learn quickly about the idea of western feminism. When I started learning about feminism I was excited. I felt empowered. To a large extent I felt a disconnect to my culture and I yearned for the modern world that the western world seemed to represent.

Then I started talking to women from around the world and especially women from Africa. Often on television feminism is represented through women who are fighting against gender roles within the home and workplace. Yet here I've seen something even more powerful. Women who are fighting for the food, security and education of their communities.

My mother was a single mother. As a child, I remember that she would often return home from work late in the evening, and be back out again early in the morning. She travelled around the country. Even when times were hard, she made sure we did not go hungry. She raised two educated women who have become successful in their fields.

My mother's story is similar to that of many others. Women who have unquestionably become symbols of the black woman's strength but

stripped of the symbol of feminism.

"The lack of the feminist label doesn't negate the credibility of Black African Feminist work."

I am because my mother was. She is because my grandmother was. My grandmother told me stories of how she built the place we now call our Kumusha (Farm/Rural Area). How at first she would sleep on a rock by the fire at night and work during the day with a child on her back while her husband worked in the city. How she started with one hut and eventually built what is now a house with plumbing and electricity.

My grandmother is feminism and my grandmother does not hate men. My grandmother, my mom, my aunts. They've worked so that I can have the privilege to have the problems that I now process. My privilege.

Feminism looks like the women who've created their own car system that takes school kids to and from school. That carries water and food for those in their community.

For women in places like Chitungwiza, feminism looks like standing in long queues every single day inorder to get access to water for the family. The risk of rape, sexual assault and harassment in this society is constant and even more so for the daughter who must be in long queues into the night or early in the morning before she is able to head to school.

She doesn't have the privilege of water and at times even the privilege of education. Yet many of these women both young and old, are building and

keeping their communities afloat. When you speak to them about gender equality they are just as quick to speak to you about uplifting the entire society and after all, isn't that what feminism at its heart is about?

When you speak of feminism people often look for the simple things. It's easy to attack a culture, attack traditions or even beliefs without first understanding the systems of oppression and most times the systems of racism that hold them up. Yet if we are to be honest with ourselves, as Kathleean Hanna says, "There's just as many different kinds of feminism as there are women in the world."

Which brings me to the most controversial ally: The male feminist.

When I'm asked about my anger towards men I often refuse to be apologetic. I have a right to be angry when I am groped in the streets. I have a right to be angry when I am harassed online simply because of my gender. I have a right to be angry at systems that make my life harder simply because I am a woman and I will never be apologetic about that but I still believe that feminism needs men and women to work together.

Finn Macky asked a question that challenged me**,** "When we say feminism is about equality which men should women be equal to?**"**

I mean the privilege here is clear to see. Simply by virtue of being a man, there's a whole host of opportunities whether in education or in the workplace that open up. There's the privilege of never having to consciously make the decision to walk around with condoms, not for your pleasure but as protection Incase a man should force himself on you so

that you may at least bargain for your health.

It's not being afraid in public spaces, not running across the alley or feeling fear with sudden movements. Not flinching at a single touch and yet having to co-exist with the loud voices of the men who have decided that simply by being born they are entitled to your body. It is being able to fear jail because there's a constant threat of rape whilst women fear the exact same reason in everyday life.

Yet I refuse to be equal to the man who fears his own emotions because he was taught to be a robot and has the inability to feel empathy. Patriarchy raised our men to believe that they need to be unemotional, confident, logical, independent, providers. This has been painted to be the opposite of what it means to be a woman.

In simple terms; What it means to be a "man" today is to not be a girl. Not be feminine. Terry Real, a world renowned therapist talked about this in a Forbes article. Stating how the human race has created what he refers to as the 'great divide' in which humans have separated themselves into feminine and masculine. Which the masculine is exalted and femininity is devalued.

In his interview he shares this;

> *"Patriarchy does not exist only in men. The force of patriarchy is the water that we all swim in and we're the fish. Women can be just as patriarchal as men by holding those same types of values and biases*

The essential relationship between masculine and feminine is contempt. I know it's ugly, but it gets uglier. The third ring I call the "core collusion." The core collusion is that whoever inhabits the "feminine side of the equation" – whether it's a child to a parent, or a hostage to a kidnapper – has a profound instinct to protect whoever is on the masculine side of the equation even while being hurt by that person.

That's true of children who are being traumatized, who are trying to regulate their parents. It's true of races who are trying to manage up to the ruling race or class that is oppressing them. It's true of women to men. I believe this is one of the unspoken, most profound forces in human psychology and human history. The perpetrator is protected."

When I express my anger towards patriarchy and I am met with the feminists hate men cliche, I think of this. I think of the thousands of men who've resorted to suicide because they aren't 'strong' enough, 'manly' enough.

I remember learning that my abuser was abused himself and then hearing the same story being true of other men. I thought of how we aren't taught to be equipped to handle the reality of our abusers being victims too. I hear of perpetrators who were abused and I think what if, what if when they tried to speak out about their own abuse they were heard and the person arrested would the result have been different today.

A lot of this is learned behavior, only about 1 percent of the world's population is made up of psychopaths. The rest of us are made up of trauma and truly become the essence of what we see in the world, what we choose to see, what we choose to praise.

For many men, even those who are raised by single mothers there is a huge disconnect with feminism. Yet if we look closely, yes even at our men there are examples of feminism all around us.

My best friend's dad always wanted one of his children to be a doctor. He made a point of treating all his children the same, they received the same education, were given all the same opportunities. It was only at school that she was told that she couldn't do anything that her three brothers could do. Yet even then he took her to his surgery and taught her. He made sure that the expectations of success for her were no different than he had for her siblings. He was keen to make sure that no matter the case, she would always be able to provide for herself. I was stunned one day when she confidently told a man that she was going to make her own money, own her own surgery and she only wanted him but he was to have no illusions because she didn't need him. My friend told me stories of her father and as I stood stunned by how brave my best friend was, I started to realize that her father too is an example of feminism.

Traditionally when a woman has a baby, they go back home to their mother so that the mother can assist and help her raise the baby for the first few months. When my cousin's wife had a baby, he told me that they wouldn't be doing that. I asked why, he responded simply, "why shouldn't I be the one assisting my wife to raise our baby and why I shouldn't I be there in the first few months of my child's life?" My cousin too is an example of feminism.

And so, as much as I continue to be surrounded by men who perpetuate everything I despise about society, I have also been blessed to be surrounded by men who support women and treat them as equal.

To men who aren't afraid to be vulnerable, men who aren't afraid to be helpful and be present in their children's lives. Men who take on chores so their wife can finish her project at work and get the promotion she's been working for. Men who aren't afraid to hold her purse and clap as she climbs the corporate ladder. Men who encourage their daughters just as much as their sons. Men who teach their sons the importance of consent. Men who love themselves. Men who can ask for help and offer it. Men who love.

These are the only men I want to be equal to. Make no, mistake the other kind is trash and we don't like trash.

If you're silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say that you enjoyed it.

- Zora Neale Hurston

03 Gender and Identity, in the Words of Women From Mauritania to Senegal

Borso Tall

INTRODUCTION

I was born into a thriving urban family in Senegal and had the privilege of learning about gender and identity through my mother's stories. Her passing in June 2019 was a strong motive to pursue the family's narrative primarily from women's perspectives, and to open grander doors to research about feminism, equality, and fair representation. This collection of stories focuses on Mauritania, where their migration to Senegal began in the 1940s.

Rokhaya, my grandmother, was born and raised in Mauritania, before she joined her relatives in Senegal in 1945. Although she never attended the white man's school, she made sure formal education was key in the lives of her children. As a young mother in her 20s, she was already a business owner, selling everything from crops to textiles. When the season was good, she would travel miles to The Gambia by horse cart to sell her crops and bags of peanuts. In The Gambia, she would purchase things she needed back home and would often return at night. She raised my older brother while my mother was in Dakar, completing her undergraduate study in

social work. He used to say that he was never afraid when she was around.

My grandmother was everything.

Kine, my mother, encouraged my every effort to travel, to mingle with the world and learn from my own experiences. Growing up, my mother taught me the importance of fighting for what I want from a moral and cultural society that is often full of hindrances. She, too, had needed to fight for the right to birth her dreams as a woman.

My mother stubbornly birthed her dreams of being a landowner and a professional social worker in addition to being a wife, a birth mother of 5 children, and mother to dozen others.

This was the primary source of discourses I was privy to as a girl child from the women in my family. I learned to develop a resilient spirit in a society marked by patriarchy – I learned to view my immediate society as a small part of a much bigger world with different priorities and more diverse realities. It's been a year since my mother passed away, but something that will never pass is the potency of the stories she left me with, as well as those collected from extended relatives for this paper.

We spoke of feminism in our home even before it was a topic people spoke about. As with other purported taboo topics, my mother demystified it and brought it to life. I recall her offering me books on topics such as sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancies. I also recall our conversations on a practice of Mauritanian women called *Mbelaha*. This word in *Hassaniya* defines the process of fattening young brides

to give them the appearance of a grown-up ready for marriage. These young women were made to drink as much as 5 jars of a mixed cereal and milk in order to achieve this desired size. The bigger they were, the more dowry they received. This practice still exists in some part of the country, although my aunts say it has become less visible due to the campaign led by non-governmental organizations focused on the protection of children and families.

My mother spoke about all of this; she wanted me knowledgeable about the realities of life in Mauritania for young women and girls.

Through conversations with my maternal aunts, I know that my grandmother, Rokhaya, had traveled to a distant land with her mother and siblings. They travelled hundreds of kilometers from her native *Bouthilimit,* a town located in the South-Eastern side of Nouakchot and known for its erudite scholars in the 19th Century. Their aunt, her mother's sister Sheriva, had preceded them on this great trip and was headed to Senegal. At that time, Saint Louis was the capital city of both Mauritania and Senegal, the first between 1920 and 1960, and until 1957 for the latter.

Rokhaya married a trader's son from Senegal, and together they had four children, one of whom died when she was only one. I remember my mother telling me about her, and about her death when they were too young to know exactly what happened. Kine's older brother recalls holding her feverish little body one time, and that is all the memory he has of her. Her name was Aissatou.

My aunt, Zaynab, does not remember the story of her birth in Senegal, but she has clear memories of her visits to her aunt Rokhaya who she

described as "a very welcoming person who hosted us every Friday, Saturday and Sunday." She also remembers their Senegalese host family, *Moussa Diop*, and says that visits to Rokhaya's house had been fun. "We had to cross Kaolack's main railroad in *Medina*. I can still go there by myself even after all these years," she says. Aunt Zaynab left Senegal in the 1960s and did not return until 2017 for medical purposes in Dakar. She remembers that her cousin, Kiné, picked her from the airport. This talk with her extended in multiple directions and coalesced into plans of a post COVID visit to Senegal.

Rokhaya divorced her husband, my grandfather, in the 1950s. My aunt, Zeinab, remembers him as a good man who had to, shall we say, adapt to my grandmother's strong spirit. I remember him as a soft-spoken man, a retired accountant, and my mother's best friend. She named my younger brother after him. Of her two siblings, a younger sister and brother, Rokhaya was the only one who married an intellectual. Her younger sister, Tislim, married an erudite in the South of Senegal. Tislim had many children but only one survived. Today, my aunt Seina lives in Kaolack.

Soon after her divorce, Rokhaya got into commerce selling woven loincloths and she was widely known by the Senegalese and Mauritanian community of Kaolack. In 1960, hearing that the president of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, was in Kaolack to pay a courtesy visit to Baye Niass who was a pan africanist and religious leader, Rokhaya forced her way through the crowd and into the official room. Once there, my uncle tells me she spoke loudly and directly to Senghor, telling him she had come to ask for a plane ticket to *Mecca*. My brother disagrees with this narrative and says instead that she was invited by Baye Niasse as an active member of the Mauritanian community in Kaolack. Per my brother's narrative, Baye Niass introduced her to Senghor and told him about her family

and family tree. At the time, Senghor was focused on enhancing cultural diversity, and her improvised speech earned her a ticket to *Mecca*.

My brother insists on the religious aspect of her life in Senegal. "When you are relating grandma's story, you have to mention the importance of the trip to Medina, the importance of her lineage to the Prophet and the way Baye Niasse welcomed her and told the city of Medina to offer *Hadiya rassouloulAh* whenever they saw her and her family or to give gifts in respect to her bloodline. It's imperative to shine light on that," he says. I say that in this period, what my heart wishes to keep is her abnegation, her dedication to what she wanted and the truth that she got it. She earned her ticket to Mecca.

On the day of the trip, she left for Dakar only to miss her flight because she got lost in the big city. Instead of returning to Kaolack, she went directly to the palace to request a meeting with Senghor in order to return the ticket. Against all expectations, Rokhaya was received by Senghor who gave her 200,000 francs in exchange, the price of the trip. This story is interesting for me because she was accompanied by my mother Kiné, a preteen who suddenly had the privilege of entering the great palace in Dakar.

Rokhaya bought a radio from Dakar. She wanted a big radio. My uncle remembers people saying that Rokhaya missed her trip to Mecca but she returned from Dakar with a big radio. A few days later, her home was burgled and the radio was stolen. She was alone, her kids grown and studying in Dakar. She, however, refused to let that incident eat away at her. Shortly after, she got into the tea and sugar business. She bought the goods from The Gambia and sold them in Kaolack. As the rainy season approached, she got seeds from ONCAD, the agency in charge of agricultural policy in Senegal from 1960 to 1980. She had a farm in

Ndiafatte, another in *Taïba Niassène*, both located in the *Saloum*. In 1969, she remarried and had her last son, who is a practicing lawyer in Dakar today. Her oldest child, a son, worked as a primary school teacher his whole life and has many daughters. Rokhaya's middle child, aunt Beyba, is today a retired teacher of home economics and health courses. All her children but two are daughters.

Kine, she had a real educational spirit led by love, faith and abnegation. It was from money through her scholarship in social work that she sent home to her mother to help raise the son she left behind to pursue her education in Dakar. It was from this same scholarship she built a front wall to protect the family home. She made the choice to interrupt her higher education in order to educate the children she later had with my father. When I sift through my childhood memories, I realize that her only concern was to succeed in transmitting love, the sure vector of all that is necessary to ensure self-empowerment as well as foundational values for the respect of women, child protection, and community service.

I remember days she unsuccessfully tried to hide a satisfactory smile when I defended the maid. Now I know this was her way of ensuring I had embraced the basic principles of social justice, women solidarity, and equality. I remember her gaze filled with joy as a woman became the first Senegal prime minister in the early 2000s. It was a dream for her, as the representation of women in institutions was low. It still is.

On all of my travels, local and abroad, mother was there. I remember her sweating face every time she had to wait long hours for me to either complete a visa application or shop for a trip inland. She used to say the sweating was because of the heat, but I think she was worried. She was seeing her daughter grow wings she only had in her dreams. With mother, I learned that society only sees a piece of the iceberg in the life of an

African woman. She wanted me to discover the world. She encouraged my community service initiatives and it's no surprise today I am deeply engaged in community service like her. She had a knack for engaging in constructive discussions, particularly with people undergoing great difficulty. She spent a good part of her career listening to and supporting people in prison.

The seeds she sowed in me have grown in a society where gender-based challenges are still very much present. As an adult in Senegal today, I see that good intentions are there, but that in reality, the will to push towards the application of principals that can fully empower and emancipate women are lagging behind. For instance, fair representation is still a mirage. What we have are ineffectual political moves designed to calm women without making any significant change.

This said, and in the name of my mother's stories and those of my aunts, I continue the narrative on equality, parity and identity.

In 2012, I founded a youth club called 'Young advocates for Human rights'. Its acronym, YAHR, pronounced in my native tongue, Wolof, means 'Education'. At 3 main levels of commitment, the aim is to build bridges between young people aged 6-35 and develop in them a strong sense of Human Rights Awareness and Civic Engagement.

1. Academics: Workshops are organised according to age groups, and participants are given a secure space to learn about the core principles of human rights. The aim is to trigger in them curiosity and a motivation to put into practice their acquired knowledge.

2. Civic Engagement: Participants progressively join various sub committees including the following;

2.1 Serving through Human Rights Education, which combines community service and the organisation of focus groups or larger community talks on Human Rights.

2.2 Young African Women and Leaders, which helps increase women's level of engagement and participation in their respective communities. Collectively and individually, they lean on haves such as the YAHR network to lead empowering talks with their peers in a period of 6 to 8 months yearly. As a core assessment, they plan, organise and evaluate a 2-day program of various Human Rights related activities in a chosen community.

2.3 Ted Talks for Human Rights, which focuses on training selected participants to become public speakers for the promotion of Human Rights.

3. Peer collaboration, where crowdfunding is frequently organized to help share knowledge, practices and experiences with peers in extended regions where there is less access to quality education.

When tested in various public/private schools and through community service, experiences show that at all levels of education, the more young people know about human rights, the better their chances of remaining in school, and the more eager they are to serve their community/country.

CONCLUSION

I had the privilege of being born and raised in a circle of strong women

who had experienced many hardships they turned into opportunities. They resisted in silence so they could raise their daughters to engage in feminist struggle, alone or in solidarity with other sisters and supportive brothers.

A week before my mother died, I came home after a successful day organizing a press conference for the YAHR network. It was at the West African Research Center near Cheikh Anta Diop university. It was all over the local news and on the internet. People were calling her to congratulate her. She couldn't make it to my event, for the first time ever, as she was still adapting to her dialysis sessions. But she was happy for me and told me that the family's dream was to make sure generations to come would live with the conviction that although struggles to equality and a fair representation are real, it was imperative to keep investing in the future through education.

I do not limit myself to the death of my mother, but I hold on to this vision that she had of educating young people. My role today is to adapt it to present realities and those to come.

Little girl is me with mother (2nd left) and father (2nd right) during a visit to relatives, Mauritania, 1984-1985

I do not have the luxury or the privilege to sit there and be civil with people who do not acknowledge my full humanity."

- Mona Elthanawy

04 And so it Goes

Linda Tusiime

Her best friend had just had a baby. There was a flurry of activity in the small hospital room, and the air was stuffy with the heavy breathing of 3 aunties, a doctor, and a nurse who was hovering over the tiny crib. Yarana was quiet, observing from the corner of the room, eager to be asked to engage in some form of activity that would render her useful and yet also hoping not to be noticed where she stood observing. Finally the medical staff walked out, leaving one of the aunties to carry the baby to Suraya, her best friend.

"Here, you have to learn how to feed him."

Suraya slowly rose from her sleeping position. She was in pain, and visibly so. She'd just endured 13 hours of labour, and had evidently not had enough rest thus far. This was her first baby and it had been a difficult pregnancy. Yarana felt sorry for her friend but she didn't want to interfere. So, she stood, watching from the safety of her corner.

"No. Don't hold him like that."

"Keep his head up."

"Has he latched? You have to make sure he latches."

"You're a mother now, you can't have *kyejjo*."

The voices of admonishment felt like direct attacks to Yarana. She couldn't help herself, "That's enough! Can't you see she is tired? Why don't you give her time to figure this out?"

Silence.

And then it came. The lecture that Yarana could swear she knew by heart.

"Eeeehhh, where do you get off talking to us like that? You who don't have children. Who doesn't even have a husband? Suraya, if these are the friends you have, then I don't know how you will manage."

That was Aunty Number One. Obvious leader of the pack. Eldest sister to Yassin's father. Yassin was Suraya's husband. The other aunties clucked in support and then went back to fussing over Suraya, conversing amongst themselves as they worked.

"It's so good you have had a boy my dear. Now you won't have any stress when giving birth to other children."

Again, Yarana couldn't help herself, "And why would having a girl have given her any undue stress?"

The exasperation on their faces could kill a wild boar.

"Now the family has an heir," Aunty Number Two was kind enough to respond, rolling her eyes as she did so.

Yarana opened her mouth to speak but caught Suraya's pleading eyes, begging her not to get into it. So she 'hmmmmed', grabbed her bag and

made an excuse to get out for some air.

She was boiling. This kind of thing always riled her up. She felt the cold outside air hit her face and breathed it in, hoping to forget how upset she was. She didn't want to feel this way, but this kind of thing always took her to that place.

She was the first and only girl with two brothers. All her life, she had worked hard to be given the same recognition that her brothers got. It infuriated her that even though she was the eldest, most successful, her mother always reminded her brothers that they should work hard because they were the heirs. Because somehow, her being born a female meant she wasn't as much a part of the family as she'd like to believe.

She sat on the grass outside the maternity ward building, letting her bag fall carelessly next to her, the shade from the tree inching away from her feet as the leaves rustled. Her silent brooding was interrupted by the ringing of her cell phone in her bag.

"Hello."

"Hello. Yarana, this is mummy, how is Suraya doing?"

Yarana and Suraya had grown up together, living next door, navigating life together like sisters. She couldn't remember how many times they had sat together in Yarana's room, complaining about how unfair life was to women. It was the reason they'd both studied law, vowing to bring justice to underprivileged women everywhere. Yarana smiled at the memory of how shocked her mother would be whenever Suraya challenged her asking them to do house chores when Yarana's brothers were idling in their rooms. You see, Suraya was petite, almost fragile, with the literal face of an angel. She had the brightest and largest eyes Yarana had ever seen that sparkled

whenever she smiled, a quality that endeared her to everyone who knew her, with thick black curly hair, always in an intentional messy bun, a few misplaced soft tendrils, untamed, that she liked to play with as she talked. She had the uncanny ability to appear docile until she started speaking. It always shocked everyone who was unfortunate to get a 'Suraya lecture'. Her soft feminine features were a quality about her that fooled people into thinking she was a push-over, but oh boy! Was she anything but.

"Aunty Sofia, what are you teaching your sons? That it is ok to do no housework?" she'd start.

"Suraya please, I don't want to argue today. As girls in the house, you have to be responsible. When people come to visit and see this mess, you're the ones who will be blamed. These are lessons you will take into your homes."

They'd go back and forth like this, until Suraya marched to Yarana's brothers and demanded that they pull their weight or else she'd never bake them cookies again. Blackmail, but it always worked. Yes, Suraya baked THE BEST chocolate chip cookies. It was the one 'female-esque' role she allowed herself to enjoy. Indeed, it was through her chocolate chip cookies that she met her now husband, Yassin, a brother to someone she worked with. It was about 2 years ago, and she'd baked a bunch for her work colleagues for the Christmas holidays. Yassin happened to love them (who wouldn't?) and for 2 weeks, he consistently called to beg that she bake him some. They met when he came to pick them up. It was love at first sight. Those were her words.

"Hello...Yarana...are you there?"

The voice on the phone brought her back to the present.

"…Ah, yes mummy. I'm here. Suraya is ok. The baby was delivered safely this morning. He's a big boy."

"A boy?! Oh, that is good news! I can't wait to tell daddy. He has been here worried all day…A boy! That is very very good news. And you said Suraya is ok? When can we come and visit? Is Yassin there?..."

A boy.

Because he was a boy, Yarana's younger brother had inherited their father's textile business when his dementia had started affecting his everyday life. By no means did Yarana want to get into that business; she was happy and accomplished as a partner in a fast growing law firm in the city of Kampala. But she always felt a slight annoyance at the fact that she was not even considered to take over the family business just because she was a girl who would one day get married and belong to her husband and his kin. Ironically, the family relied on her for support as the textile business was not bringing in enough money to take care of her brother's own young family and their aging parents. While she sympathised with his state of affairs, it annoyed her that she was expected to understand his inability to manage the family affairs as he was supposed to in the first place, and instead she, as a well off lawyer, was expected to take care of the family because she was the 'girl in the family.' The irony of it all.

A boy.

It was indeed good news. But then, even the birth of a girl should be good news, shouldn't it? At any rate, it would have been better news for Suraya. She'd always wanted a girl first. It was a statement for her. A girl who'd be the first born, who'd be the certified heir to everything she owned. You

see, she figured that a boy would assume he was heir because he was male, not because he was first born. It's something that always irked her during family disputes.

"Girls take better care of their families," she'd say, "Why do people always want to leave property to the useless selfish children just because they are boys?? It's so unfair!"

Yarana remembered how they'd sat together in the nursery the day she found out she was having a boy. As a mark of defiance, she'd gone and bought a set of pink onesies, just because her sister-in-law had called to say how nice it was that they knew what the baby's sex was because now they could buy blue presents. She was sitting on the carpeted floor, lovingly folding each onesie, pressing it to her face before she kept it away. It was strange, she was happy and yet she seemed down. The thing is, it mattered so much to her that a girl would be the one in her family to call the shots, make the decisions, with her given birthright as her claim to power. It was something she had discussed with Yassin, who frankly speaking, loved her so much he'd have accepted her asking him to tattoo a smurf on his butt cheeks. It was his family that was the problem. They couldn't fathom that such a beautiful young bride was so headstrong, so different, so difficult. But then, she was so incredibly sweet when she meant to be, it was impossible not to forgive her for any 'indiscretions'.

"It's ok, Suri. You'll teach him all the things you wish men had been taught growing up. You'll teach him not to be entitled, not to expect undue respect. You'll teach him so much."

"I know," she grumbled, "but still, such a missed learning opportunity." And then she giggled like she always did when she said something silly.

"Besides," Yarana added, "I'll be here, I'll be the voice of reason."

Voice of reason.

"Yarana…Yarana…are you there??" Her mother was still on the phone.

"Mummy, I'm sorry, I need to go back inside, but I'll call you later."

Voice of reason.

Is it reasonable to accept a place that society gives you because of the chromosomes you possess?

Is it reasonable to accept that your person negates you to automatically belong to someone else…in the future more less?

Is it reasonable to use your voice only within the confines that you are allowed to?

Yarana sighed as she picked up her bag, flicking the dry leaves off the soft fabric. She was tired. Tired of asking questions that got her no other answer than *'because that is the way it is dear'*. She was tired of asking women to question why they didn't ask for more, why they insisted on teaching other women to learn their place. A place that she and Suraya had fought against together for so long. She was tired. And in a sense, she could feel that Suraya was too. And it made her sad, that one's spirit could allow itself to be crushed because the world was so loud in the lessons it taught. That its inhabitants were so unforgiving. That a different thought was labelled wild, unaccepting, deviant even.

She opened the door to her friend's room. Suraya was sitting up, feeding her new baby, she looked up at Yarana and smiled. Because she knew what she was thinking; they'd discussed it so many times. Suraya's eyes glazed to the aunties who were seated at the foot of the bed, talking, and she

dramatically rolled them, a small laugh escaping her dry lips as Yarana walked towards the bed. She sat lightly on the bed, looked at the baby and nodded.

"He's beautiful," She whispered.

"Yes, beautiful. And I can use that phrase even if he's a boy," was Suraya's happy response.

Yarana smiled, looked at the baby cooing quietly, and nodded.

We must cease being participants in our own oppression.

- Stacey Abrams

05 Nigeria and my Feminist Awakening

Chineme Ezekwenna

I didn't consider myself a feminist until I went to live in Nigeria for a year. I was faced with such a stark presentation of gender - its accompanying roles and inequalities - while living in Southeastern Nigeria, that I was faced with two choices, to adapt and follow them or live the way I saw fit and thus subvert gender prescriptions. I chose to live my truth but to this, I had to do some soul searching and define for myself what feminism and gender equality meant to me. And how I would live out these principles in my environment at that time and moving forward.

Personally, I saw feminism as the individual and collective belief in access to economic, social, and political opportunities based on human dignity instead of one's sex. This ideology recognized that barriers to gender equality differed depending on a woman's identity, taking into consideration race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and age. And

furthormore, that women's overlapping identities impact the ways in which we experience oppression and discrimination; thus, women's rights and gender equality advocacy must address all of these.

Before my trip to Nigeria, I had observed and faced gender inequality. I had lived within patriarchal societies where "boys will be boys" was the oft repeated excuse for the oppressive actions of men. Those societies not only vindicated men from their actions, but women survivors were the ones who were too often held responsible for their victimization. I will never forget the 2015 People v. Turner case in which a Stanford University student, Brock Turner sexually assaulted Chanel Miller. But despite being convicted of three felonies, he received a light sentence and throughout the hearing process, the survivor was blamed for the assault.

In Nigeria, I was confronted even more directly with gender inequality and the need for feminism due to my proximity to some of these issues, especially the sexual- and gender-based crisis that had been rocking the country for years. I felt a need to not only believe in the dignity of humanity regardless of sex and I was pushed to actively advocate for it. I was astonished at the extent to which sexist ideologies and policies were ingrained into society.

A friend once tried to explain to me how gender equity initiatives in STEM were detrimental to men and why it was illogical for women to study electrical engineering. According to him, women did not have the capacity nor strength needed to excel in this field, since they were too weak to conduct some of the necessary tasks, such as climbing electrical poles. While this might seem laughable, he was very serious. There are many more like him who feel both intimidated and threatened by the possibilities of women excelling in male-dominated fields. For others, a woman is 'allowed' to achieve feats in her career only as long as they don't

intrude on the domestic and caregiving tasks she's relegated to at home. And many of these beliefs were typically justified by interpretations of religious text, in my context typically the Bible.

Reflecting back over the years, I realized that my feminist awakening had been mounting throughout my life. During my mother's 50th birthday party, I remember exchanging words with one of the guests. An announcement had just been made about food, and as is typical in these settings, women were called to serve the men first. In my frustration, I expressed how this was a prime example of the inequalities and ways in which men are esteemed above everyone, notably women and children in Igbo and Nigerian communities. The young man looked both shocked and embarrassed, as I then proceeded to assist with distributing food to him and other guests. But even before this incident, gender equality had already been espoused in the ways in which my parents raised my siblings and I - two girls followed by two boys. In our house there were no gendered chores nor double standards among the children. Everyone washed dishes, cleaned, cooked, washed the cars, etc. When we grew older the same dating and romantic relationship rules applied to my brothers, my sister, and I equally. My parents pushed all of us to excel in our academics and to become economically independent.

With further reflection, it became evident to me that my feminist inclinations were birthed in the long line of strong women on my matralineal side before I was even born. My mother and her sisters were and continue to be leaders in their homes and their communities.

Take my grandmother for example. Mama Janet, as she was affectionately known, was a disciplinarian who wore many hats. Her husband's job caused him to travel often, and so in the 1967 - 1970 Biafran war, Mama Janet became a matriarch who was the pillar in her community in Anambra

state, Nigeria. She provided for herself and her children by working as a trader and agriculturist. At home, she trained all of her children to do all chores: regardless of their gender. All of my uncles and aunts fetched water, worked on the farm, washed dishes, washed clothes, cooked, cleaned the house, etc. She ensured that each and every one one of her children were self-sufficient individuals. And then through the support and leadership of her eldest child, the *Ada*, my mother and her siblings were all able to obtain a university education.

Mama Janet's oldest child happened to be a girl, and this daughter was my auntie Uche and she was prioritized in ways where she would not have been in other families, considering she was not a boy. After completing her secondary school education, Auntie Uche went to nursing school, then graduated, secured a job, and proceeded to foot the bills for the tertiary education of all of her six younger siblings. My auntie Chika also works in the medical field as a pharmacist. She owns her own pharmacy, and has juggled being an entrepreneur, pharmacist, and mother. Both of my aunts are leaders not only within their households, but are also considered pillars in their communities following in Mama Janet's footsteps. What I find truly remarkable about all of these women - my mother included - is their economic independence. Irrespective of their marital status or situation in life, making and owning their own money has always been fundamental. In my opinion, economic independence will always be a more robust determinant of success for me than marriage and fertility.

These past few years in which I've worn my feminist identity like a badge, I've continued to deepen my knowledge of this ideology. One major learning that many people don't seem to realize is that feminism is not a monolith and feminists differ in practice, background, and ideology to name a few. Moreso, not all women are feminists. Women do not all agree

with each other nor do we need to do so!

All of the world wars were birthed out of conflict between and fought against men. This expectation of women unity - in the face of global male violent division - baffles me, yet isn't surprising. I find it interesting and rather unfortunate that some of the most vocal folks fighting against feminism are the ones who would benefit greatly from feminist work and dismantling patriarchy.

Earlier this year, an anti-feminist man was complaining to me about how women aren't united. According to him, feminists purportedly advocated gender equality, but in actuality were misandrists. Later in the conversation, he expressed what he described as the unequal and unfair emotional burden men carry and how his culture requires that men be strong for the family, sometimes to the detriment of their own mental health. Yet, when I told him that feminism fights against toxic masculinity and advocates for uneven weights to be lifted off of both women and men, he rebutted that this was all a ploy to emasculate men and eradicate his culture.

I have often remarked on the vast amount of unpaid labor that women are expected to perform from a very young age. It was in Nigeria that I was introduced to the rigidly prescribed 'gendered chores' where girls were relegated to cooking, washing dishes and, cleaning the house, while boys washed the family car, carried bags in the market (if they accompanied women), and fixed household items that were broken. On face value this might seem like an even distribution of chores, but when one considers both the frequency and exertion required for the various tasks, such as cooking, it becomes quite clear that girls have more responsibility and time allotted to chores.

And as these children grow into adults, women are given the additional

responsibilities of childcare and household laundry services while her male counterpart is expected to provide financially - something which in many cases women are doing alongside him anyway. And too often, while it is clearly obvious that women in such predicaments are overworked and juggling too much, their *loving* husbands stand by and watch or 'help' their wives occasionally instead of partnering with her to share the load consistently. All of this happens, while society sings her praises for carrying such a load, forgetting that she should not need to bear this load alone. Something that never did make sense to me was the extreme and sometimes misplaced adulation of women, particularly mothers. Out of this frustration stemmed this short poem that I wrote and posted on Instagram on the cusp of women's history month in 2018:

"Over-glorified, over-criticized, yet under-appreciated:

Woman.

To genuinely celebrate is to acknowledge one's

actions AND compensate them accordingly.

If society claims that women are so

wonderful, amazing, productive, virtuous, essential,

then why are they still on the fringes of society,

overworked, yet underpaid and underrepresented in leadership positions."

Instead of venerating women verbally on mother's day and throughout

women's history month, it would be impactful to implement policies, decisions, and other actions that would redistribute dignity, power, and wealth to them.

In general, society upholds double standards by denouncing behavior committed by one sex, while dismissing it in the other. Typically, men are given a pass (especially when it comes to moral issues), which are not afforded women. These double standards seen in gender roles consist of, but are not limited to, training girls with meticulous attention and from a very young age to be proper women - which usually translates to being 'good' wives and then mothers. Conversely, boys are not accorded the same amount of time, attention, and accountability when being trained to be men; this training rarely teaches them ways in which they can be 'good' husbands and fathers. We often see that a woman's success is equated to fertility within marriage, while a successful man is a wealthy man. I wrote another poem on my musings which I posted on Instagram on June 7th, 2018:

"We teach our daughters;

Yet love our sons.

We teach her to be a good wife;

To be dependent on a man,

First her father, then her husband.

To juggle twice as much as him.

We teach our daughters;

Yet love our sons.

We love him to a fault,

Excusing his bad behavior,

Until he grows into a man;

Absent father, irresponsible leader.

We teach our daughters to die;

Yet love our sons to death."

In the poem above, I did not proffer any solutions, but rather outlined the reality for a majority of folks. I would like to propose solutions now.

It is time for us to look squarely at society and identify the myriad ways that oppressive systems impact individuals from various backgrounds. Then we must eliminate those oppressive systems by ensuring that we replace them with restorative structures. BIWOC (black, indigenous, and women of color) need to be intentionally centered at all levels for lasting progress to occur. And within the home, both men and women need to actively train all of their children fairly, regardless of their sex. We

really need a huge global shift, where we place more value on our shared humanity rather than one's sex and the restrictive roles assigned to them.

No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half its citizens.

- Michelle Obama

06 To What are we all Aspiring and Does it Matter?

Victoria Malowa

I often think of femininity as a sense of place, a place that dictates a woman's life by setting the limits within which she can operate. Sometimes it encircles a woman into a claustrophobic embrace by defining what is adequate, acceptable, or even courageous. A woman's identity weaves into this space; some have found ways to thrive in it; others rely on it for survival while others unknowingly create their myths around it. But then others have felt arrested by its smallness and have decided to push back. I recently found one such woman in a book titled, 'Becoming.'

As the first black woman to be first lady of the United States of America, Michelle Obama defied expectations, and her success has, and continues to inspire many women. Her accomplishments are incredible, from Princeton to Harvard Law but, I cannot help but wonder what her story means for women like me.

Michelle's path to glory was fraught with numerous

challenges, personal sacrifices, identity crises, and she triggered even more undesirable scrutiny when she became the first lady. I recall one interview of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Britain's Channel 4 News in 2016. In it, she said that if Michelle Obama had kinky hair, her husband would not have become president.. I have always thought that there is absolute simplicity to being a black woman, but as we add more layers onto it, the banality begins. Michelle's entire life and being- face, skin, hair, accent, family, education, etc. was torn apart, mended and validated. The purification process would then separate her from the masses who, unlike her, are unable to 'defy stereotypes.'

As African women, we seldom think of how 'symbolic' successes and emotional wins are paraded to us and how they amplify our self-esteem and give us something with which to fantasize. When my fellow Kenyan, Lupita Nyong'o won her Academy Award for 'Twelve Years a Slave,' we were excited to interrogate the stereotype she played in that role but not so much, her long and tumultuous journey into Hollywood.

The reality is that women like Lupita Ny'ongo and Michelle Obama are exceptions. The exaltations of these one-offs feed us psychologically and emotionally so much that we miss the institutional infrastructure that continues to limit women of colour in many sectors. Michelle's story signifies all the people who have helped build up who she is, but I cannot help but think of how the title 'Becoming' is an anomaly. It means you start from somewhere and end up becoming something.

One of the great paradoxes of being black is seeking validation from people who not only set the criteria for success but also rig the game against you. The first white institution that truly distinguished and validated her was Princeton, an institution where few black people and especially black women are given admittance. Therefore, it comes as no

surprise that the Obamas were unable to affect any meaningful progress for the black community in America. They were processed through white institutions, ordained, and quarantined against the rest. Michelle found it challenging to exist in both worlds, overlapping between two cultures while belonging to neither.

I realize how slim a chance I have at deciphering the clues and nuances, and finding peace not only in my African identity but also in my femininity, thus existing in a world slightly dimmed in colour and vibrancy. That we depend on individual institutions to declare us as capable or successful is disheartening. What bothers me the most is how poorly African women, in general, are viewed. Inbox full of characterizations of other races' superiority, that do not fit as neatly for successful African women. I think of how we weaponize other exceptional women's successes against the supposed minimal ambition or lack thereof in others. Oh! Why can't you be like her? She made it, did she not? Never mind many who have been content with small but significant social changes and may not have been interested in 'impeccable' achievements. Are we all meant to drool over such tremendous achievements? And why should we? What is wrong with the woman who feeds, clothes and provides free education for children in obscure parts of a country and educated in some unknown college? Who authenticates her? Who determines whether her success is valid or not?

Is there a right way to be successful as a black woman while being cognisant of a debased African identity? How does one perform this, and how do I execute it? Who decides who the most successful African women are? Do I have to wait to be discovered? Mitchell Obama feels like a pioneer at the edge of a giant forest, wading a path into the forest, with a critical mass of women ready to follow her in. But can they find that path to make their way once inside the forest or is the path overgrown with new

bushes?

As I read through her experiences growing up in South Side Chicago as an ambitious high-school achiever with a tendency towards self-doubt, it reminded me of my struggles with self-confidence. I loved Swahili literature in high school and I read many times the book 'Walenisi' by Katama Mkangi, a story about a space odyssey narrated with beauty and glamour. I was fascinated by the genius and eloquence of the book.which seemed ahead of its time. And yet, this book which I so admired, came from a backdrop of horror and the humiliation of wearing the 'Monto' - a bulky metallic device worn around the neck - for the crime of speaking Swahili. I wanted to learn to write like Katama Mkangi, but somehow, I believed I could never write like him, maybe because I did not believe in myself, or maybe there were simply no books like that written by Kenyan women. Experiences like these shaped my mentality, femininity, and my understanding of what would make me successful in life. This is why we need to validate all forms of success so that more African women can aspire to not only the symbolic achievements but also the everyday ones that shape the lives of people across the continent and the world.

I have deliberately fashioned my career around utilizing the absolute best of my abilities to promote social change and inclusiveness. But as I entered the world of work, I realized that that dream also came with its own complications. These complications include unconsciously engaging women in ways that disempower them by forcing them to act and speak in ways that are acceptable to those more powerful or privileged. Once, in a development organisation where I worked, we sought to empower more women by promoting their political participation. We held several leadership and mentorship sessions. In one of the sessions, a former female politician cautioned the women aspirants to learn to tone down

their messaging because being too aggressive could ruin their chances of success. I saw the anxious looks on the aspirants' faces as they listened and took notes, without objection. I realized that we were working hard to enlist women into a broader political industry without institutional support that would allow them to thrive.

I think of how we define success as individual courses of triumph with no recourse to examine the pathways of such success stories. We celebrate female political titans like the late Nobel Peace Prize winner from Kenya, Professor Wangari Maathai, who battled fearlessly against the most powerful men, and we shape her story in a way that her struggles seem like the authentication for her success. Female engineers, pilots, architects, are singled out and celebrated because they work in male-dominated professions which seems to authenticate them as successful. But as we focus on their accolades, we ignore the lack of institutional power that forces them to strive so hard to get to the top and even harder to stay there. I also think of how we ignore all the midwives in Isiolo in rural Kenya who without quality medical equipment, have been able to ensure successful births of thousands of children in obscurity.

I have since learned to challenge the narrative that we should all sit back and endure society's abuse against the defiant women so that we can celebrate them as champions and overlook the systemic change required to enable more women to become successful. I refuse to worship the struggles of women who 'make it' as a justification for their acceptance on the walk of fame. That we should put suffering as a badge of honour and tolerate the humiliation, abuse, and pain experienced by women as a normal part of the process towards success is unacceptable. That the success we genuinely recognize is the one authenticated by the most powerful amongst us is disingenuous. We forget that as we parade these successes, we are not only

inherently punishing those we deem not to be striving hard enough but also elevating the most potent forces that continue to oppress us.

As we toil harder to make a difference or obtain the most noticeable accolades from authenticating institutions, the irony must never escape us. Mrs. Obama worked hard to break the mould and achieve what many African American women can only dream. Still, we only celebrate her because her successes have been authenticated and validated by the very institutions and people with a long history of exclusion and torment for women who look like her. And even after occupying the White House, they were unable to fully implement the 'Change you can believe in' because we all participated in elevating them only as props. Because we have given the tools, language, and cognitive path through which we can understand and celebrate our successes, it denies us the ability to look at success differently for African women.

As African women or women of African descent, oppression may have motivated us to take different directions. Still, we make the difference in creating systemic change that continues to matter whether we are housewives, midwives, activists, or the first-ever black first lady of the United States of America.

Nobody warned you that the women whose feet you cut from running would give birth to daughters with wings.

- Ijeoma Umebinyuo

07 Africans and Feminism : Beyond the Donor Funds

Makalay Saidiatu Sonda

I never really thought about this concept called feminism, especially in my early teenage and young adult years. In the spaces around me, women's struggles and pains were so normalized that I didn't question the right and wrong of happenings.

My aunt, who was also our neighbor, was riddled with punches and blows every time she and her husband had a misunderstanding. My father received numerous unsolicited advice from his uncles anytime they came to visit. You should marry a second wife so you can have male children, they said on more than one occasion. My mother did not have a son. Instead, she gave the world three girls who were incapable of extending our father's lineage and caring for him in his old age. How could his daughters do any of that when they would get absorbed in new families who would become their singular focus? As if marriage would take away our personhood. As if being wives somehow meant we couldn't be daughters.

Up until his exit from this world, my father had one wife.

My experience with feminism started at the time I was writing my undergraduate degree dissertation. The topic was, "Assessing commercial radio stations broadcast on the promotion of women empowerment in Sierra Leone," and that research led me to concepts like feminism, social justice, gender equality and equity. Prior, I had paid little attention to the particular ways the world exists, especially for women. I hadn't paid enough attention to this world where honor killing was a reality, where a fetus is aborted for being female and therefore undesirable, where men in a family unit can block a woman's access to contraceptives against her will, where abortion regardless of the circrumstances is frowned on but female genital mutilation is one of the many prices to pay for being female.

I was living in a world so patriarchal, a woman's body could be controlled by the state, family, and community. A world where her body belonged to everyone except her.

It made me angry. I was angry because I couldn't understand why one gender should face so many injustices just for being. I remembered the stories my father used to tell me about his father. My grandfather had 26 daughters and 12 sons. He refused to formally educate his daughters because he believed school was exclusively for boys. The way he saw it, it was more important that girls stay home, learn household chores and how to be mothers at the feet of their mothers. After all, their greatest service would come through marriage. The boys, on the other hand, would become family heads and carry on the lineage.

My father and his brothers made the education of their younger sisters their responsibility. But what happened to the older ones who didn't stand a chance? They got married early. Many were forced into marriage. They

became completely reliant on their husbands and most could not educate their children.

I don't need research to understand the insidious effects of gender inequality. I saw it first-hand. Somehow, one man's - my grandfather - decision has transcended time and marked the lives of generations after him.

Feminism is an ideology I take personally. One that gives me the opportunity to widen my scope and understanding of inequality and simultaneously the courage and zest to shorten the gap in the ways that I can while standing up for girls and women everywhere.

A year after graduation, I set up a Community Based Organization called *Moonteen*, and relocated to a rural part of Sierra Leone. My entire life had been spent in the city, and so the realities of the provinces shocked me in many ways. One of the biggest was coming face to face with the condition of girls. The district I was resident in had one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the country and it was not unusual to see girls younger than 15 who were wives and mothers.

Through *Moonteen*, we started building the capacity of girls in the community, discussing hitherto taboo subjects like reproductive and sexual health and rights, menstruation and menstrual hygiene, rape, sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and so on. We wanted these girls to stay in school and leap for a life beyond their current circumstances. To see that take shape and have over 150 girls stay in school over the past 2 years has been a highlight of my journey as a feminist and further solidified my belief that often, girls just need to not be limited based on their gender. They need a chance.

In my country, there are many gender advocates but very few identify

as feminists. In a conversation not too long ago, I had a friend ask me the reason for this distancing by gender advocates. This is not a new conversation.

Feminism according to iwda.org is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. "It is about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full rights." Merriam Webster defines feminism as: (1) the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, and (2) organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interest. Which begged the question, "why do some gender advocates refuse to be identified as feminists?"

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, a Nigerian writer and a feminist once said, "saying you're a feminist is like saying you're a terrorist." Owing to the negative perceptions and myths around feminism, many gender advocates I know refuse to identify as feminists. One of the consistent arguments I have heard for this decision is that identity doesn't matter. But doesn't it?

Taking on an ideology means embodying its core principles and living out those principles. I'd say one of the primary steps in embodying that cause is owning the name, outside of the inaccurate meanings that have been associated with it. In Chimamada Adichie's words, we should all be feminists. Outside of institutions, we must unite to create sustainable and lasting impact in the fight for gender equality.

Years ago, after I became a feminist, I learnt about my mother's desire to initiate my cousin, who was five years old at the time, into the Bondo Society. The Bondo Society is a traditional rite of way where Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is practiced. I immediately tried to convince my mum of the demerits of FGM, the real dangers it poses, and the

ilegality of this undertaking as FGM is prohibited for girls under the age of eighteen in Sierra Leone.

She didn't listen to a word I said and retorted by asking if I had died when I went through the same experience as a two year old child. How could I tell her about the aftereffects of that past action in my present day life? I couldn't reach her, and so on the day the initiation was scheduled to take place, I ran away from home with my cousin.

We returned when the dust had settled, and there was no conversation of my cousin being mutilated again.

I am a Pan-Africanist and a Feminist. In the eyes of many, these two ideologies are parallels owing to their false attribution of feminism as a Western ideology. Anyone that researches and reads further about African history can clearly see that feminism is as African as Africa itself. Specific examples from history are the Dahomey Warriors from present day Benin, an elite all-female warrior troop who protected their land and king with great bravery and represented a part of femininity that is hardly portrayed, celebrated or respected.

Queen Amina of Zaria is another example history gives us. A great warrior and leader, she was the first female to have ruled an African Kingdom for over three decades during the sixteenth century. During her reign as queen, she introduced the metal armour and helmet to the military, expanded her kingdom, and removed all obstacles that blocked direct access to the Atlantic coast thereby improving local trade for her people. Not to mention, the walls Queen Amina built around her city to fortify it against attacks are still up to this day in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, and are known as *ganuwar* Amina, which means 'Amina's wall'.

More recently is the example of Madam Ella Koblo Gulama of my

country, Sierra Leone. Madam Ella Koblo Gulama was born in Moyamba, Kaiyamba Chiefdom in 1921. At a time where educating girls was not the norm, her father made sure she was educated. She became a paramount chief succeeding her father after his death and was also elected to the house of representative as a paramount chief member for Moyamba District. She further went on to become the first Female Cabinet Minister in Sierra Leone and Sub-Saharan Africa. Madam Ella Koblo Gulama was deeply interested in the educational development in Sierra Leone and worked hard especially to promote girl's education.

Many Africans who loathe feminism and deem it un-African do so because of an untrue and outdated perception that the African woman's place is exclusively in the home as a caregiver. To them, an African woman is she who answers 'yes' as a default to everything her husband and family say even if her safety, wellbeing and freedom are compromised. But we know that feminism has been in Africa even though it was not known by that name. Our ancestors, the women of time past, ventured out, took up challenges and conquered. They ruled kingdoms, protected their lands, and were many things in addition to being mothers, wives, and daughters.

History teaches us that African women have always been capable and remarkable. May we listen.

Teach her that if you criticize X in women but do not criticize X in men, then you do not have a problem with X, you have a problem with women.

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

08 Walking This Path

Nana Sule

"Oh You who believe, stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against your own selves or your parents or your kin, be he rich or poor…"

Surat An-Nisa 4:135

The first time I felt like a fraud, I was at a friend's house in Kano. My friend has a friend who is an acquaintance of sorts. We had left the cinema and returned to her house for a drink. Our conversation began with movies and the creation of female versions of male heroes. I told them, I personally didn't see the need for a Supergirl, or a Black Spiderman. What I would have loved was to have original ideas created specifically for the female gender and other diversities and minorities. The acquaintance was quiet for a while, then he said that I was doing the thing that made it problematic for one to talk to me. I was being a hypocrite, he said.

I was shocked. I had never in my life been referred to as a hypocrite. In fact, I prided myself on being a reliable enough, one-faced person, whose stance was always known and clear. I asked what he meant. He said, that I was quick to bring

up issues pertaining to gender and *claim* that I was a feminist, but I was married and I was going home to cook and clean and financially depend on a man. At that moment I felt two things; I was angry, certainly. But there was also something else that I couldn't explain, a tugging at my heart, where it had become increasingly difficult to determine if I was living a lie, if my life and my beliefs were going in paths that would never converge.

The days following that encounter, I found myself unable to do anything. There were so many questions in my head. I struggled with convincing myself that I was feminist enough. My idea of feminism, and indeed, what it meant to me, was my ability to have an opinion and, a choice about my life and everything surrounding it. It occurred to me that I had never actually taken time to study the concept that was feminism and, what feminism meant to women before me, women around me, women who were Muslims and who inherently practiced feminism alongside their religion. I wanted to be certain that my religion, and now, marriage did not invalidate my ability to fight for things I considered worth my while. I wanted, really wanted to be certain that I had the right to say that I am feminist.

I have lived all my life in Northern Nigeria. I grew up in a family of academics who expected everyone, regardless of gender, to have an education, and get a job. In retrospect, perhaps it was because I grew up in the University staff quarters in Zaria, and all my childhood had revolved around seeing people teach or learn, that I never really saw what the society expected of me. It took me getting into the university in Minna, another city, leaving the shelter of home, to see the world in a different light.

My first reality shock was having men seek my hand in marriage. As far as

they were concerned, I had visible breasts and I was in the university. I was seventeen; We were the 'fresh students' in a male dominated campus. The secretary to the Dean of the faculty I was in, had singled me out and taken my phone number from my file. He called to tell me how outstanding my life would be as the mother of his children, living in his house, taking care of him. I was certain that there was more I expected from my future than solely catering to another human being. I turned him down and he told me that I would come running in my final year, older and less beautiful, begging for a man to marry me. It was the first of many times, I would be shamed for saying no. The first time that I started to realise what my society expected of me; to be accepting of the fact that my value as a human rests on how good a wife and mother I can be; to be valued for everything but my intellect.

Undeterred, I spent my time creating a reputation for myself. I was involved in school debates, wrote my first book, and it was while volunteering for a group invested in environmental protection, that I met the man who would later on become my husband. Back then, he was just a friend who guided me through the process of applying to attend my first conference abroad.

At the time, I was interested in another student, someone I was considering a relationship with. When the issue of traveling outside the country came up, this person was resolute in convincing me to let go of the possibility of attending the conference. He queried me, asking if that was my plan, to leave my husband and travel around the world. And if I thought a good Muslim girl was supposed to travel around and do anything other than aspire to being a great mother and wife.

I felt so sad. I expected that the person I loved would also love me enough to understand that I had a vision for myself beyond picking up after him.

And yet I am a religious person, or so I like to think. He had sent me verses of the Quran, and a number of hadiths proclaiming God's instruction on women to obey men and men to guide women. He sent numerous texts about a *woman's place* in life. The only thing that held me back from tearing up the books was the fact that I couldn't bring myself to disrespect books in that way. I felt rage, bubbling inside of me. I wasn't sure yet what I wanted in a life partner, or if I even wanted a life partner, but I was sure about what I didn't want. I didn't want a partner who would sabotage me, my career, or my growth. I had to read, to find out if my religion had truly confined my worth to the whims of another man.

Surprisingly, the first person that made me feel like I deserved to be happy and live my life to the lengths I wanted to, was the prophet of Islam. I had learnt about his marriages, his wives, his life and his passion to improve the conditions of women through the religion he preached. And I could not reconcile that same religion, the one that prohibited female infanticide for example, saw women fight wars and sought to promote rights of women by enforcing their rights to own property and wealth would be the same one where women's dreams go to die. Re-learning the religion at my own pace, and making sense of the words of the Quran, and the life of the Prophet, and the history behind the verses that were revealed, and the teachings that were documented, helped me see how often these verses and texts were misrepresented. These misrepresentations pushed a narrative of women in Islam as invisible, quiet, meek and enduring of all suffering to be considered righteous.

My knowledge allowed me the freedom to live without feeling like I needed to prove my righteousness to anyone. I didn't need a man, father, brother, husband or son to serve as an intermediary between myself and my God. It helped me find purpose. My existence was to serve my Lord.

I could serve my Lord in the many things I found fulfilling; in reading, learning, and teaching. It was upon this conviction that I lived, knowing that I was before God, as important as anyone else. Yet, I often wondered if this was born out of my own bias, of my own need to find some form of meaning.

My ability to hold control over my choices and actions gave me the courage to challenge a lot of things. I soon found myself noticing the suffering women were expected to endure in the name of family, society, culture and religion. My journey led me to volunteer with a group of women who offered counselling and legal services to women and girls who are survivors of abuse. I met women who had become shadows of themselves, married to men who took their positions as husbands to mean ruler and tyrant. More painful for me, was that I met women, who although were aware that they were married to mad men, were willing to continue in the path they were on because they believed this was the life for women. It dawned on me that there seemed to be an implied agreement by everyone, that marriage for a woman meant suffering, the endurance of that suffering, the revelling in it, and the ability to accept inhumane treatment, not only as inevitable, but as norm.

I was disappointed. I felt let down, by Muslim men, especially. I wondered if they took time to study the religion, if they truly thought that they were placed on earth as God's vicegerents, if they did not see that they were oppressing women. I met a woman. She had been beaten up by her husband for refusing to have sex with him. She explained to me that the reason for her refusal was that she had just had a baby and had not fully healed from the tear she sustained during the birth. But, when I told her that even without that reason she was well within her rights to deny him sex, that though she was married, she still had a right to her own

body, she cut me off. She blamed herself, absolved her husband of any wrongdoing, and believed she had no right (having willingly consented to the marriage) to her own body. She was one of the first people to call me a feminist.

I was labelled a feminist, long before I called myself one. It was a label I neither denied, nor claimed. I had also had a number of suitors warn me that I would not find the sort of love I was looking for. But I did find that love and I married into that love, having expressed and agreed upon my entering into the marriage, my expectations of being treated as a human being capable of choice, opinions and reasoning of my own.

Shortly after my wedding, I fell very ill. I relocated to Kano to stay with my husband, and be nursed me to good health. I had also taken time off social media, to rest. One day, I received a message from a former co-worker that said, '*finally, husband has tamed you and we can now hear word*.' I could almost feel the excitement in his words. I could feel how happy it made him, to think that another woman who was going haywire had 'learned *her* place.' His message spurred me, while still frail, to recommence my writing and steer conversations around women and how the world had failed us. It was why I decided to accept the label, feminist, as it had been used too many times by men I have attempted to have conversations on gender with, to throw a jab, as though being feminist was a sting at my personality. In defiance, I started calling myself feminist.

However, no one had ever questioned my feminism. If anything, they felt sorry for my partner. Perhaps they felt he was getting the short end of some masculinity stick, or they thought that on the basis of my feminism I would treat my partner (who has come to mean the world to me, who continues to prove me right that women can have and enjoy a reasonable union where they never have to feel less of themselves) in a way that

would diminish him or attempt to emasculate him.

Perhaps this was why I was taken aback by the accusation. Could I truly not be feminist and married? Was it impossible for me to be the two? Were the choices mutually exclusive? Was I having a pipe dream to wish for every woman, a life lived on their terms?

I went back to reading. To truly understand what feminism meant, its history and why it carried such a negative connotation amongst men in Northern Nigeria who I share the same environment with. Around this time, I was sent a link to Khadija Sanusi's essay supporting the theory that one couldn't be a feminist and a Muslim woman, as Islam had already given women the protection they needed. I read through the piece trembling.

It brought me back to reading about my religion, to once more decide if I was overstepping or within my religious rights. My findings, like Khadija must have found, and many women before and after us will find, was of women in Islam who excelled in every spheres of life. It was of Islam promoting the fair treatment of women. But was there implementation of this fair treatment of women by Muslim men?

And if personally, I have seen, heard of and, cried with women being mistreated by men who have sworn to love and protect them, was I to fold my arms and let this continue to happen? Because we believe religion to be perfect, did it mean Muslims (men) were so perfect they didn't need to be cautioned and punished for their crimes against women? Did it mean that I had to turn a blind eye when atrocities were being meted out on women under the guise of marriage, because I am married?

My conclusion: No.

It is the duty of all Muslims to strive to right all wrongs that we come

across, to see injustice and march against it. I had picked my fight, finding injustice where it affected women and reducing it in my wake. I had a right to do this, I was not going to stop.

Wardah Abbas' rejoinder to Sanusi's essay resonated with me, as it addressed the inclusivity of feminism in Islam. I shared Abbas' essay with a reading group I was part of on WhatsApp and a member of the group sent me a private message, asking why feminists clamoured so hard to be like men. I said to him, when slaves wanted to be free, they were said to be clamouring for their master's positions. When black men wanted emancipation, they were said to want to equate themselves to whites. And so, when women want to have control over their own lives, to not be beaten, and abused, to not have to give up on their dreams, to be human, they are said to be clamouring to be a man.

The oppressor always knows the power he wields, and so feels threatened when that power is questioned. If this wasn't a point of reflection in itself, that spoke to the internalized inequality and injustice between sexes, an injustice that saw wanting to be human as wanting to be a man, and so translating into women as being less than human, and so less than men, I didn't know what else would point it out so clearly.

I had expected to have an insightful discussion with the man whom I replied, but as I have come to expect with men and they have so often proved me right, his response was to divert from the topic. His next line of defence was to ask if my husband found my obsession with gender equality admirable, and how he prayed that I didn't take my feminism into my marriage. And I was back again to that point where all I do and all that I am is being measured by how it affects my husband and my home.

It made me remember the time someone thanked my husband for allowing me to volunteer for a project, rather than thank me for my time, energy and expertise. It is about how all I do would be reduced to how generous and oh so kind my husband is to *permit* my existence and tolerate this errant wife who does not know her place. And I would understand why a relative had once asked if it wasn't tiring, fighting for justice and equality for women, if it wasn't easier to just accept that all that I was expected to become now, was an extension of my husband, devoid of my own thinking, knowing my place as only visible with relations to him.

I would then truly acknowledge how tiring this path is to take, but also hold firm to my conviction that it remains the right path: I owe it to the women who first cleared the way, and to the women who after me will turn it into road.

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My feminism is a journey to self but also a loving redemptive journey to a dignified life rooted in sisterhood, in belonging to self first and a humanity where I am fully cared for.

- Judicaelle Irakoze

09 To be Seen is not a Destination, it's a Journey

Nneamaka Nwadei

I have only just come to terms with my beauty: The shape of my eyebrows, the deep-set of my eyes
The swell of my nose, the bones beneath my cheek. The curve of my lips and the moustache right above.
The angle of my ears, the spots on my skin. The hair on my chin and the second chin beneath.

I looked in the mirror countless times, to check if my shirt was buttoned right, and if my skirt wasn't too tight. I checked to be sure my eye liner wasn't running, and tried to see how my iris expanded under light.
I stood in front of a mirror to pop a pimple, to floss my teeth or pull out hair from my chin.
To redistribute my foundation, and reevaluate my earrings.

People never really complimented my features; I wasn't beauty queen standard.
I knew I had a waist but it was sleeping under layers of healthy skin.
The ground I walked on wasn't worth worshipping- I walked on

plain land.
So I set to work on my mind: if I couldn't make you stare, at least, I could make you think.
I never could understand why a boy would like me. Me? 'abeg, go to that your fine friend'. Yet I wanted someone to behold me and think 'this is where my search ends'.

One day a man called me beautiful, and I felt spiders crawl over me
I thought it was a big deal and I was going to become a sex object.
But my friend told me: you have to own your beauty, it's not a sin
If a man calls you sensual, it is not just because of your curves,
It is because of the work
you have done
to be aware
of yourself.

As a young girl, I made myself heard. I was assertive and could easily make friends with other kids in the neighbourhood, I was the loud one with no care. I can't exactly recall what made me so confident but perhaps it was the memory I have of my father speaking to me, still as clear as day.

One day he came home early from work, spoke with my mother for a while, then asked me to dress up and come out with them.
We took *okadas* to the fast food restaurant at the bus stop, and my dad asked me to take whatever snack I wanted. I asked for sharwama straight away, asking 'can I have that?' after the waiter had left with the order. He and my mother took meat pies.

I could not understand the reason behind their taking me to a fastfood, in the middle of the day, without a reason and I tried to think about my most recent crime, if this was the new way they intended to discipline us: first feed, then flog.

My mum noticed my unease and asked me to relax, so I did.

When the waiter came back with our orders, my father encouraged me to start eating. The African child in me was not comfortable with all the attention. Something did not feel right. Few minutes later, my father told me the very thing that has become a core of my identity as a young woman.

'Ada, your mother and I want you to know that we love you and that you are beautiful. Now you are growing, men will come and tell you that they love you, they want to take care of you, they will make you promise, but most of them want to take advantage of you. Don't ever think that a man outside will love you more than your family. We might not be able to give you everything you want, but we will provide what you need, and you will not lack'.

I can't remember much of what else happened that evening, but what I do know is that after then indeed I heard many times from men that they could take care of me, yet my father's words rang loud: 'we might not be able to give you everything you want, but we'll give you everything you need'. I felt at peace.

In secondary school it gave me confidence, whenever I exhausted my provisions, I would say to myself, 'don't worry daddy will bring another one'. I was so sure that I wouldn't ever go hungry nor need anything. In my guardian's house, I had a big bag, filled with cornflakes, milk, sugar, biscuits, everything I could possibly need. It was my reality and it also

reflected in my cheeks and my stomach. I looked like a rich kid. We weren't rich, I just had a dad living up to his promise.

I was a happy kid, but teenage years came and they came with hormones, self-awareness, inferiority complex that turned to superiority complex, self-esteem issues and bad acne. I began to feel inconsequential in the scheme of things, like I wasn't important to anyone else except my family. The years were long and painful, I was a bubbly kid in my home, but I caved when we went out. I started walking with hunched shoulders, I couldn't make friends, and tried to avoid speaking with my age mates at parties because I didn't know what to say.

One day my mother asked me 'why do you do this, why do you go into a shell when you are around people?' And I said 'because they are better than me'.With a straight face she replied 'they are? How? What did you see?' And then I couldn't speak. I didn't know how they were better than me, I just believed they were. They probably wore nicer clothes and had cuter hair ribbons or something. My mother said: 'they might have rich parents or wear fine clothes, but they are not better than you. You are beautiful and you are precious, and there is nothing wrong with you'.
It took years before I could walk without slouching or caving my shoulders, but I got past it.

In a movie with a high profile female CEO and a high profile male CEO, the two assistants set them up for a romantic relationship because they feel the bosses are too occupied with work. After a lot of failed attempts, it takes the male CEO simply saying 'I see you' to get the lady to fall head first in love with him.

Growing into a young woman is a full time course with a little embellishment of other supporting characters, and beyond what your family says about you, what you say about yourself matters a great deal. Knowing that I could sabotage everything in my path with a wrong or warped understanding of myself and my worth helped me look for options to this unending question of what people saw when they saw me.

It's no different for us in the workplace, this thing about perception. I read a report once on how people apply for jobs. It showed that men applied for a job when they met 60 percent of the job requirement while women didn't apply until they met 100 percent of the job requirement.

Women proceed to do things when they are 100 percent sure there is nothing wrong with them, when they are sure of success, when all the square pegs fit in a square hole, and we beat ourselves up when we don't reach the standards we set for ourselves. I think we judge ourselves too harshly.

On this journey of self discovery, to be told by someone that they see you could be a compliment, an assurance. But to see yourself through your own eyes: to be able to process each thought running through your mind, to label the emotions, to react to yourself before you react outwardly, to pause and reflect through each morning of your life - each new discovery, that is sight that can not be traded. It can not be handed to you in a reassuring hug. You give it to yourself.

With so many people sharing their thoughts, feelings, and gifts, it's easy to feel like you're not being heard. Like you're not making a difference. But sometimes in our desires to be seen by others, we stop looking into ourselves.- Lori Deschene

Often, how we show up in the world relates to how we show up for ourselves. We can not represent other people effectively while we constantly receive the shorter end of the stick when it comes to speaking about the things that matter to us.

One day, I stood in front of the mirror and said 'baby yi fine sha'
I saw my eyes- they fit just right in my face
And my nose- too thin and I'd look like an alien
And my lips- oh, God really did me well

I held my breasts and felt their weight; I couldn't be more thankful for anything heavy
I know I have a waist, a belt will bring it out, and my backside, good lord!
It always makes me shout.

My mind amazes me, how I think and what I say
Finding that I can evolve is a gift I explore everyday

I've never really liked to be icing,I love to be the cake.
Yet for so long, I thought I was anything but something to celebrate

I have only just come to terms with my beauty
In the eyes of this beholder: I'm fearfully and wonderfully made.

To be seen is not a destination, it is a journey. Some days are better than the others but we don't stop looking inward. We are like onions peeling

off new layers of our femininity- finding the sensual, the hard headed, the beautiful, the insecure, the alpha female and her beta, the never ending discovery of new nuances of our womanhood.

Let it be, that your identity is like a shard of glass, sending a million colors into the universe under the gaze of light, and that your voice reflects the wealth, the freedom, and the capacity of your mind to be at peace in your journey.

They'll tell you you're too loud - that you need to wait your turn; and ask the right people for permission. Do it anyway.

- Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

10 What Kizz Daniel's 'Tempted to Steal' Song Taught me About Gender Roles

Ojonwa Miachi

As a bonafide Kizz Daniel fan, I listened to his recent single, *Tempted to Steal*, and I was in awe of the power music has in passing critical messages, including one centred on the impact of gender inequality on men and women. *Tempted to Steal* is a ballad that projects the insecurity of a young man and his fear of losing his girlfriend because of his financial inability to cater for her. The male lover ends up robbing a store and unintentionally kills someone in the process. At the end, it is implied that he is arrested and a short pause towards the last line of the song gives the impression that the girl still leaves him.

Owing to necessity, gender roles have changed over time across eras and cultures. For instance, war or the outright resistance from a subdued party, evidenced in revolutions like the Aba Women Riot and the Women's Suffrage Movement led to an improvement in women's right to

economic empowerment and political participation respectively. However, oppression in different forms for both genders still exist. Harmful gender norms and stereotypes have pressured men into being sole financiers who provide for themselves and their partners in heterosexual relationships.

These unwritten laws reflected in gender social norms and practices have a high socio-economic and psychosocial impact on women and men differently. The general rule of thumb is that men provide while women become homemakers focused on building a family.

The implication of these gender roles are huge. This mindset has led to the existence of toxic masculinity in some men, reflected in their ability to blur the lines of right and wrong to impress women, their peers and the society at large. When men are not able to provide for their partners and family, they question their existence. On the other hand, the burden of unpaid domestic and care work on women limits opportunities for women interested in building careers. In some workplaces, even women who have grown through the ranks are naturally expected to take on the responsibility for roles involving catering, gifts purchases, hygiene management or other domestic chores in the workplace - because it is expected that she knows better as these roles are primarily suited to women.

There are economic implications for the country and the world at large too. The narrative that women are meant to "relax and be taken care of" can have a huge impact on the human capital formation of a country. In simpler terms, if women make up half of the population of a country and they do not have the experience or skills to work in sectors with vacant positions available, it puts the socio-economic development of that country in jeopardy.

This is not to minimize the importance of domestic care work; however, it is a challenge when women within households who are foisted with this responsibility are unpaid for the work and not appropriately valued. Unpaid care work does not usually come with vital work and social protection benefits such as pension, and health insurance. Not to mention, in the case of a separation, divorce or death, the non-income-earning partner will likely struggle to survive without any savings, pension or workplace experience.

I grew up in a unique family. My parents of blessed memory had five daughters. They did not have a son. We were playful, loving and supporting of each other and there was an unmistakable sense of security and comfort at home.

We did not notice a void in our family, until we started getting comments like, "who will inherit your father's Volvo car because you can't?", "you do not have to spend so much on your daughters' education because they will be another man's property," "I'll take you to a man of God who will help you get a son," and so much more.

My dad, an anthropologist and administrator, got a job in another town which made it necessary to run two homes. My siblings and I were mostly with my dad and we saw our mum on weekends. I am the youngest child and was two years old at the time. During this period, my mum was relentlessly advised to quit her job so she could focus on the home front even though it was not an issue for us as a family and we were thriving. Neither my dad nor my siblings and I ever complained about my mum's job taking her away. We also did not love her any less. I believe her experience

was one of my greatest experiences of gender equality because she had the unopposed right to choose her path. My dad never made caring for us her responsibility alone because he understood that we were also his children. Not to mention, we had support from family as well as paid help to assist with childcare. As the youngest, my dad did my bedtime routine and sang lullabies. He was there to help when our menstrual periods started. I loved the parenting synergy between my parents and how we never felt anything was missing. At the end, it was a win-win. We got to grow into 5 self-reliant women and my mum had an amazing career as a lecturer in science and technology, even rising through the ranks to become the first female Chief Lecturer in the department of Science and Technology in the Polytechnic she worked in.

When my dad became sick in 2016, things became financially tough. Dialysis alone cost NGN75,000 a week. It is an easy guess who financially supported my dad's treatments - my mum, the same woman who had been advised to quit her job, and my sisters, women who were well educated and empowered to bear the financial costs. Imagine what the reality would have been had my parents yielded to the pressure from outsiders to groom us to be "men's properties" in the future.

Recently, a lot of discussions have popped up about how women must learn to bring something to the table to be marriageable. Apparently, people no longer want wives who cannot afford sanitary pads and stock cubes to cook. The new "woke" line is "as a woman, you should be able to bring something to the table more than sex".

However, in all the advocacy for wanting financially independent women, we also need to shine the light on key interrelated points that will help empower women, which includes men taking more physical and mental responsibility of unpaid domestic and care work as well as ending gender

discrimination in the workplace, so women are more economically independent.

In relation to household cost share, it is not my opinion that a 50-50 contribution is compulsory between two partners. I believe the greater cost responsibility should be on the partner with greater disposable income. As the popular Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie says, at the moment, historical challenges may bend the scale towards men since women and girls are still grappling with issues like access to education as well as discrimination and harassment at work.

The big question now is - how do we solve this problem? Individuals, the society, workplaces, and governments have a huge role to play. It sometimes seems like a complicated web, but we must start by changing our mindset as a people. Women and men both have to unlearn the things we have internalized from childhood. As individuals in our gender identities, we must aim to work as partners in relationships and ensure no one is left out in the quest to thrive and contribute socially and economically to society.

As a society, we must move with the times and understand the impact of harmful gender roles and stereotypes and change the narrative by practicing gender empowering actions and creating awareness. The media, through the narratives and storylines created, can also help foster the change needed. Religious establishments also have a strong role to play, as religious and traditional leaders have the power to change stringent upheld cultures and practices people earnestly believe and practice.

Workplaces must create environments that allow for both women and men to handle unpaid domestic care work such as paid paternal and maternal leave, remote working from home where possible, shift-based systems and crèches within the workspace. These policies in a workplace allow time for

adequate care work within households by partners. For instance, paid and adequate maternal and paternal leave allow both parents to get accustomed to parenthood and make appropriate adjustments for childcare. A crèche in a workplace where safety is paramount gives parents the opportunity to physically be in the office and still simultaneously have their children nearby for care and similarly, remote working and shift-based hours where possible allows for the possibility of care and meeting up with work deliverables concurrently. If there is anything the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us, it is that remote working is possible in specific industries.

The government has a role to play in creating budgets that are gender responsive. Care centres for children and senior citizens can be created in collaboration with relevant sectors, and changes can be made that allow for men to care for their children. For example, building changing rooms where either parent can carry out diaper duties and revamping the education curriculum that promotes harmful gender stereotypes that do not foster the empowerment of women and men. It is also important that key policies are set in place to recognize and advance the economic value of care work. Licensed and monitored agencies should be put in place to allow for effective recruitment of nannies and domestic staff.

Men deserve to do work that matters to them without being put under undue pressure. Women deserve the right to choose the life they want to live without being put in a box of who they should be.

Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate, and to separate things that appear to naturally belong together.

- Angela Davis

11

On Being Feminist but not Anti-Men

Challenging harmful gender relations and social structures that reproduce oppression.

Priscilla Sena Bretuo

"When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development."[1]

The society I grew up in has some intolerance for feminism and feminists. While we were studying for end of term exams in our final year at the university, I clearly remember one of my closest girlfriends telling me with conviction, "Feminism is an absolute absurdity which convinces gullible women to turn against respectable men and I want nothing to do with it," she paused and then added, "and you shouldn't either." Not knowing much about feminism then, I nodded my head in silent compliance. This sentiment mirrors the view of several Africans about feminism and so at first encounter, I found the above statement by Ama Atta Aidoo, a Ghanaian writer and self-proclaimed feminist, both jarring and paradoxical in many ways.

Feminism is a touchy subject and African women who

openly proclaim themselves feminist are suspected of being anti-male – women who want to upset the natural order of things and have no interest in being married to a man. For this reason, I always felt apprehensive whenever anyone asked if I was a feminist. Often, I would either wittingly change the subject or evade the question altogether. I did not want to be added to the anti-male pack or be lumped with those against "God's natural order for the universe." This was more so the case since I was brought up in a traditional and religious environment where the roles of men and women were hardly, if ever, crossed.

This is not peculiar to me, and it is not a secret that many Africans shy away from labelling themselves feminists. That being the case, why then would Ama Ata Aidoo insist against all sensibility that all women and also men should be feminists? What has feminism got to do with African development anyway? I have learnt a lot more about feminism over the years and experienced somewhat of a shift in my thinking about this "movement" so let me clarify by talking first about gender and sex, then feminism.

On Sex and Gender

Gender typically refers to personality traits, roles and behaviours that society considers appropriate for boys and girls and men and women. The underlying assumption of gender is that differences between men and women are fixed in biology (sex), suggesting the immutability of such differences and hence, the hopelessness of change[2]. The widespread idea that gender is immutable because sex is immutable is however

2 Nicholson, L. (1994). Interpreting gender. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *20*(1), 79-105.

fundamentally flawed for several reasons. While sex may signify an objective and identifiable difference between men and women (based on the body), the differences identified by gender are subjective as they are primarily constructed by society, taking precedence from performative acts that have traditionally been associated with each sex over the course of time. Hence, further to biological differences, the construction of gender is based on the norms, beliefs, culture, history, and politics of a society. These variables underpin the way a society is organised and by extension, the relationships or interactions deemed acceptable between people.

Gender is thus primarily a crutch used by society to help differentiate between that which is male and that which is female so that a person born with "male" genitals is labelled as a man and such a label is underpinned by specific meanings which frame the way such a person is socialized (to be manly/masculine) and consequently, the behaviours and role acceptable and "normal" for such a person in society. A person born with "female" genitals is labelled a woman and socialized to be feminine. Therefore, though biology is a tangible natural distinction that to a degree influences behavior and manifests in our functionality and human identity, society has played a much stronger role in distinguishing that which is male from female and defining that which is masculine and feminine. These definitions arguably have helped to maintain sanity and some level of predictability in societies over the years but have also been a source of oppression and suppression for many.

The main challenge today is that though societies have evolved significantly, conceptions of gender steeped in social perceptions about the acceptable role of men and women in society have remained largely fixed. Most societies have held tightly to age-old traditional definitions of gender in spite of the fact that all over the world, there are now numerous

persons/groups that are pushing the boundaries of sex (through medical procedures such as sex change operations and hormonal injections which transform men into women and vice versa) and challenging the boundaries of gender. Technological advancement has increasingly given people agency to change their sex, and the revolution in the way we work and live our lives has created the impetus for the disruption of social conceptions of gender across societies. Consequently, no society is static. Every society in the world is in a constant flux, subject to technological, social, political and economic change, and so, definitions of gender should be fluid and give people room to adapt to their changing environment.

As society plays a huge role in determining that which is masculine from that which is feminine, even conceptions of what constitute gender differ. This means that aside the argument made earlier that the evolution of societies over time (within change) warrants a fluidity in the definition of gender, the historical, social, political and economic differences between societies also means that the roles and behaviours associated with each sex (gender) are not universal and all pervasive. They might be the same in some societies but vary significantly in others. An example of a society where the roles of male and female are quite different from what is traditionally known worldwide is the Akan ethnic group of Ghana. Among this group of people, inheritance is matrilineal which means females hold the primary power position in the control of property and the line of descent is traced through the female line. Also, among the Mosuo, a small ethnic group in China, often characterized as matriarchal, the women are usually the head of households and are responsible for making financial decisions. Inheritance is matrilineal and the family lineage is traced through the female side so children take their mother's name. In addition, not knowing the father of a child does not carry the stigma it does in other societies since children belong to their mother's

household.[3] Beyond reproduction and care, women are generally viewed with more respect and importance in such societies and the gender roles are quite different. These differences across societies testify to the fact that gender is socially constructed. Hence conceptualization of gender vary across patriarchal, matriarchal, matrilineal, capitalist, socialist, communal, etc., societies even though the variable of sex may remain fixed.

On Feminism

This, arguably, is where the fundamental flaw in feminism and the ordinary man's understanding of it emanates. Feminism largely originated from the West and is the belief in the social, economic and political equality of the sexes and is largely committed to promoting women's rights and interests.[4] Throughout the history of the West, women were restricted to the domestic sphere, while public life was the preserve of men. In middle ages Europe, women were not allowed to own property, study or participate in public life. Women could also not conduct business without a male representative and married women could not exercise control over their own children without their husband's permission[5].

However, to generalise these experiences of women in Western cultures upon women in other parts of the world and to use this as a reference point for feminist activism is reductivist and unrepresentative. Beyond sex, the identities and experiences of women all over the world differ significantly. Though there may be some underlying commonalities, sex

3 Mattison, S. M. (2011). Evolutionary contributions to solving the "Matrilineal Puzzle". *Human Nature*, *22*(12), 64.

4 Brunell, L; Burkett, E. (2020). "Feminism". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

5 ibid

and gender are interpreted differently in different societies and hence, men and women in different societies experience them differently. Thus, there is not necessarily a universality of individual experiences across gender to warrant a universal feminism. This signifies the need for a feminist discourse that does not generalise about the construction of gender and the meanings and roles associated with it across all societies based simply on biological commonalities. There is a need for a feminist discourse that is more socially specific, capturing the variety of experiences peculiar to the social setting of men and women in other parts of the world, including Africa. This may mean having different types and subtypes of feminism that will capture the lived experiences of both men and women in different societies. Linda Nicholson[6] made a profound statement which echoes my personal thoughts about gender and feminism – "Biology cannot be used to ground claims about "women" or "men" transculturally." This is because biology is not the main or only determinant of the construction of gender and so in the feminist discourse, the label, 'woman', does not have to possess a singular understanding.

The understanding of woman should be open to the challenges others might want to highlight, hence, allowing for the ideals of liberals and conservatists to be subsumed under feminist activism. Each individual should have the agency to determine what it means for them to be woman and by extension, what kind of activism captures their marginalization[7]. Therefore, the ideals of conservative women who see sex as primary in ascribing social roles should be reflected in the feminist discourse as

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6 Nicholson, L. (1994). Interpreting gender. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *20*(1), p89

7 ibid

equally as liberals who see it as not. For example, instead of perceiving reproductive and care roles as being private functions forced on all women, for some, it is a chosen occupation as it is seen to have critical social and economic consequences.[8] Among the Minangkabau of West Sumatra in Indonesia, which is a matrilineal society, tribal law requires daughters to be the inheritors of land and property but women are largely restricted to leading in the domestic sphere while men take up political and spiritual leadership roles. Both genders, however, feel this separation of roles and functions is not disenfranchising but rather, gives each an equal footing and balance in society[9]. There are several other examples of women who contrary to western feminist assumptions about the home, family and motherhood being sites of oppression rather see these private functions as empowering as opposed to disempowering[10]. Hence, as there is a huge diversity of social realities and gender issues across the world, including Africa, assuming a universal feminism in itself is marginalizing. Each should be given agency to highlight their conception of what it means to be 'woman' and their experiences of marginalization as a result of being one. Not all women see men and the dichotomy between the public and private as the primary source of oppression. The same applies to the meanings associated with man.

Contrary to dominant feminist discourse, women are not the only ones oppressed by patriarchal and other power structures. Some men also

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8 McEwan, C. (2001). Postcolonialism, feminism and development: intersections and dilemmas. *Progress in Development Studies*, *1*(2), 93-111.

9 Sankari R., (2016). The World's Largest Matrilineal Society. http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20160916-worlds-largest-matrilineal-society

10 McEwan, C. (2001). Postcolonialism, feminism and development: intersections and dilemmas. *Progress in Development Studies*, *1*(2), 93-111.

experience similar oppression. There have been several occasions where men have felt significantly burdened by the social expectations of being a "man". The weight of being the head of the family and the main financial backbone of the nuclear and sometimes extended family is a huge burden most men in patriarchal societies have to bear and struggle with for the better part of their lives. The burden of always having to be brave and strong in the face of adversity; invulnerable; emotionless and aggressive is quite taxing on some, if not most men as those who are unable to live up to these expectations are seen as less manly by society and often treated with scorn. Women are therefore not the only "victims" of oppression and power; men also are. The feminist discourse however has focused predominantly on only women and their oppression. The way the dominant feminist discourse frames oppression otherises the oppression some men also face as a result of the gendering of roles in society.

Therefore, I argue that the essence of feminism should be about giving both women and men the agency to define who they are and choose what roles they want to play in society without judgement. More importantly, feminism should be about challenging and transforming harmful gender relations (both for men and women) which are reproduced through socialization. As already established, beyond biology, gender relations intersect with the wider context of political, social, economic and cultural systems. Those gender relations that oppress the sexes through more harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation, widowhood rites, child marriages, female infanticide, gender-based violence; sexual violence; neocolonialism; imperialism; inequality, racism; religious fundamentalism, dictatorships and corrupt systems[11] are what ought to

11 Susan Arndt (2000). African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An In-

be challenged. Many Africans, particularly men, have a negative attitude towards feminism but at its core, feminism is not an anti-men's movement and it shouldn't be. Rather, it is a movement for the liberation of the sexes. Hence, people who identify as feminists should not be automatically considered to be anti-men. Based on these criteria, as so profoundly articulated by the Ghanaian writer and feminist Ama Atta Aidoo and then, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, "We should all be Feminists."

Perhaps it is the negative notion associated with feminism that motivated the likes of African American writer and feminist activist Alice Walker to endorse womanism in reference to a black feminist or feminist of colour, which subsequently was adopted by African feminists like Chikwenye Ogunyemi. Womanism recognizes the peculiarities of the oppression associated with the social context in which different women find themselves while recognizing men as partners, rather than enemies in challenging the harmful and denigrating aspects of gender relations in such contexts. It is to distinguish African feminism(s) from Eurocentric feminisms (liberal, social, radical) rooted in western history. The change in terminology perhaps is not particularly essential as I think it is largely a play on semantics. It is however very essential to recognise the role context and its peculiarities play in defining gender so that feminism is not just about women and women's rights but more importantly, fighting to challenge all oppressive gender relations while emphasising agency within reasonable boundaries. Men and women all over the world should be able to discover and define themselves on their own terms and have the opportunities to pursue their aspirations without being confined to

terview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni

specific roles defined either by society or linear feminist thought.

Daughters do not have to inherit the silence of their mothers.

- Ijeoma Umebinyuo

12 Equality in Senegal: a dream or an eternal quest

Sokhna Mbathio Thiaw

The oppression of women is an international concern. Despite some major historical changes for women's rights, the world as a whole still has a long way to go when it comes to women's emancipation. That being said, feminism's approach can differ from one continent to the other and while women in Scandinavia or other parts of the western world have made some societal gains for their rights, women in Africa are still lagging far behind the rest of the world. Thus, the feminism talked about in Europe, America, Asia… can be different from the one talked in Africa. And because of the cultural differences, the feminism in Senegal can differ from the one in Ivory Coast, in Zambia etc.

Women are always socially represented as less important than men. So when we talk about feminism, we talk about the consideration of women, we talk about fair representation, we talk about human rights. This is a link and everyone who is concerned about human rights has to show support for women's rights. Hence, feminism is not only a fight for

women like many men think because we won't gain equality unless men stop oppressing us and recognize our rights.

Equality is my dream, my grandmother's, my mother's, my sisters' dream. Equality is the dream of the working woman, the dream of the stay-at-home woman. Almost everywhere in the world women feel oppressed, excluded, inferior, invisible, unheard, despised. Everywhere in the world, women find it difficult to fully enjoy their rights. So equality should be an everyday quest for women. Although it is far from being achieved, we shouldn't just dream about it, we must work for it, we must pave the path for the young generation.

As a child of a housewife, I understood at a very young age that being a woman is a difficult position. Being a housewife in my country is hard and challenging. You have to take care of the house, the husband and the children. When I was younger, I remember that after a long day of school, my sisters and I would help our mother because we were aware of how hard it was for her to take care of a whole house and its occupants. We would share domestic chores while our brothers ran out to play with their friends, watching cartoons or simply resting on the sofa or napping. That was how it was in our neighbors' house, in my aunt's, my grandmother's, my friends' houses.

My mother wouldn't force them to help because our society is structured in a way that everyone believes domestic chores are for women. It was a norm. It was also a sort of training for us girls to prepare us to take care of our own households in future. In school, boys had more time to concentrate, study and to do homework but even while writing exams, we girls had to help with house chores. Is it any wonder then that boys are more likely to stay and succeed in school?

Although it was hard for us girls to focus on school and do our chores, my mother was determined to push us to do so. As a young girl, she had dropped out from college after failing the exams for her graduation certificate. She got married and lived with my dad and his big family. At that period, if she had tried again and obtained her certificate, she could have become a doctor, or an administrator or a teacher, but she didn't. So she pushed us because she never wanted us to sacrifice our studies and settle in a marriage early, relying on our husbands to provide for us. She dreamed bigger for us.

Growing up, I became aware of the gender gap very quickly. My childhood best friend dropped out of school after her mother, a housewife got very sick and could no longer take care of house chores. I recall she was suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure and for many days my friend would miss classes because her mother was very sick and she had to cook for the family and take care of the house. The house was full of jobless grown up men but none of them would cook. They would have been able to do it if they were taught to, but in many Senegalese families, it is taught that a man should not enter a kitchen (an old saying and no one is able to tell where it originated). Due to her long and repeated absences because of her mother's ill health, she could no longer keep up with her studies and failed the exams. She repeated the same class the next year and failed again. So she dropped out of school.

From that experience, she changed from wanting to become a doctor to wanting to get old enough to get married so that she won't have to do the household chores of her big family. As we got older, she kept the same mindset. She got married and is now a mother of three. She doesn't regret her marriage, but she always said that if she could go back in time, she wouldn't have dropped out of school. She knew how different her life

would be if she had been able to graduate and get a job. She would have been happier and much emancipated if she fulfilled her dream of being a doctor. Years after, I was discussing with her one day about life, study, work, and she sadly said that her children would never come to her for help with their homework because they knew she had forgotten the little she learned.

In Senegal, it is not culturally accepted to stay in bed relaxing after a day of work while your husband is cooking or taking care of the children. It is not even well regarded to share house chores with your husband. Tired or sick, it is the role of the wife to take care of the family. And Senegalese families are large. Many married women live with their in-laws, which means they have to be the ones to take care of them.

This aspect of marriage is not discussed enough. It is important to emphasize roles in a marriage. If boys were taught, at an early age, that domestic chores are not only for women, we would be less frustrated today and we would enjoy married life more. Men have to understand that it is okay to cook for their wives, share domestic chores with them and take care of the children when she's busy doing something else. It is very common to see a woman cooking, cleaning, feeding a baby, while her husband is lying on the sofa watching wrestling or football.

As it is also very common to see a woman beaten by her husband (sometimes killed) because she did not cook or because meals were not ready on time. In November 2019, in downtown Dakar, a three months pregnant woman was killed by her husband because his lunch was not served. The woman had been feeling unwell and gone to the hospital. When she returned, she met her angry husband at home demanding to know where she had been. Her explanations were not accepted by the angry man who insisted that his lunch should not have been delayed. He beat her for two hours before

the neighbors were finally able to unlock the door and intervene. Between the complicated early pregnancy and beating of her husband, the woman died on her way to the emergency room.

These kinds of atrocities are typical, and it should make us wonder. Are we sensitizing enough? Are we educating our sons enough about love, respect and compassion? Why are women so controlled and violated by men? Why are some men so violent towards women?

Our society is so patriarchal that it teaches boys to be virile, hard on women and on themselves, not to show emotions or compassion. But we have to know that patriarchy also disadvantages men (even if they mostly benefit from it). The injunctions related to virility and roles push men not to invest in their emotional side. This even has an impact on their life as spouses and as parents.

We must teach our children to respect each other so that as adults, they can apply what they have learned. It is long term work that needs to start at home and at an early age for the desired effect. It is necessary to focus on education, but also not to forget the important role that culture has in this struggle. It is a strategy to denounce injustice, discrimination, while making women aware of their values, their intellectual and other capacities in order to break this culture of endurance and silence that is forced on them all the time.

On last year International Women's day, I shared a short video highlighting what most women go through daily. The video was saying : *be a lady they say, don't dress too short,… man don't like sluts, don't talk too much / loud,… don't get raped,…don't show too much,… cover up,… don't eat too much, endure the pain, don't complain…you'll make a good wife someday…* I captioned it 'Just be a lady, they say' with the sad emoji not only to show

compassion but also because I was told most of these exact oppressing things. Someone commented, 'forget about the lady in the western framework, be a *yaay faal.'* A *yaay faal is* someone who belongs to the branch of Sufi Brotherhood Muridiyya which (according to some people) commands women to be submissive, endurant, obedient, pleasant). He also sent a text of the great religious guide Cheikh Ahmadu Bamba on how muslim women should behave. The text was directed to a married woman who visited the spiritual guide and he gave her advice about patience, perseverance, repentance, wisdom, avoiding sins, complying with the recommendations of a God-fearing spouse.

He wanted to use religion to show me that, as a woman, I have to accept certain things. But the advice of the Cheikh was given to a particular person (a married woman), in a particular moment (maybe she was going through hardships or her relationship with her husband was deteriorating) at a particular period because women weren't going through the same thing hundreds of years ago. This had nothing to do with me, a single woman of the 21st century, being oppressed at home, in the streets, at school, or in a workplace.

If being a *yaay fall* means being muted and never speaking up about what women go through, then I don't ever want to be a *yaay faal.* This should have been my response to him but I didn't say that. I didn't want to discuss feminism with someone who denies my frustration, my rights to speak up, someone who thinks I have never experienced this kind of oppression, someone who thinks that these things only happen to western women, someone who thinks because I'm a muslim woman I should conform with oppression and embrace it as a norm.

Many men tend to use religion to oppress women. This is due to the fact that most of us call ourselves religious but don't learn about the place of

women in our religion. Culturally, we don't even encourage women to study religions. My mother used to say to me, 'a woman doesn't need to read the whole Quran, she just needs to know some verses to pray with.'

Our society is controlled by men and they teach women to submit to them like they submit to God. They misunderstand and so misinterpret certain verses and use them to their advantage in order to oppress us. There needs to be a discussion between religious people and feminist organizations so that we can set the record straight about how it is religiously advised to treat a woman. If we don't, men will keep on using certain verses to silence/belittle women and legalize domestic violence or violence against women in general.

Nowadays, violence against women is so normalised that women get sexually abused or raped because of how they are dressed. Rape victims are asked, 'what were you wearing? 'Why were you out so late?' It is like a woman should expect to get cat-called in the streets, harassed or raped when they show some skin or walk all alone at a certain hour of the night. Society blames raped women under the pretext that they were dressed provocatively. Whilst it is totally acceptable for a man to wear shorts, be topless in the streets or walk alone late at night without getting harassed. Men think it is alright to verbally and physically attack women. We culturally trivialise street harassment, insults, hurting and humiliating words without taking into account that verbal violence leads to the physical one. We must raise our voice and say ENOUGH!.

Women's rights should be considered human rights and thus, we must join hands with anyone who is concerned with basic god-given rights to achieve our goal.

In order to spread awareness about women's rights in our societies, the

fight should start in our homes and as mothers and sisters, it is our duty to sensitize our loved ones. We can keep talking about feminism and electing female representatives but as long as our societies continue to teach us that men are better leaders than women, we will never have full equality. And it all starts with men taking power over them at home (women = house chores, men = head of the family), in the streets (men harass women), at work (men in leadership roles). Women are always considered as the weaker sex and that needs to change.

We need equality. Human rights teaching should be incorporated in every school so that girls are aware of their rights and boys can grow up respecting those rights. Our society is phallocratic and it needs to be re-educated so that women and men can have equal opportunities and representation.

One of the most frequent arguments I hear against feminism is that in a patriarchy, women are kinda lucky… "Men protect women." The question is, from who? Men protect women, from who?

- Amarachi Nickabugu

13 She, Too, Belongs Here

Tawakalit Kareem

I was a feminist before I knew what the word meant.

Perhaps it was because I was a child who was most at home by herself, in her own space. Perhaps it was the many journeys I took through the pages of books where the woman was often in desperate need of a savior. Perhaps it was in the conversations in places that passed quickly but left pieces of their essence in my consciousness, lying in wait for when those pieces would be needed. Or perhaps it was the innate confidence of a child who always knew, somehow, that she belonged here.

I don't know exactly what it was, except that I was a feminist before I knew what the word meant.

A woman who was an intricate part of my childhood died a few weeks ago.

When I heard the news, on a Thursday in October 2020, my

voice seemed to cease and I couldn't control the wave of sorrow that swept through me. I cried; big, ugly tears that tore through my heart. I curled in a fetal position and willed the news to be a lie. Surely, she couldn't be dead. I had just told my mum a while before then that I would like to check on her. And she was just…dead?

It wasn't right. But even more, it wasn't fair.

She was in her mid-50s and one of the best humans anyone could ever know. I hold many fond memories of her; of smiles that reached her eyes and of school supplies she sent to me that kept me fed in boarding school. Whenever school was on break and I came home, she would ask me when I was going back again, just so she wouldn't forget to bring my stash of milo, milk, sugar, detergents and all of those things.

Her husband died more than a decade ago, leaving her with 3 children. But even when he was here, he hadn't been really here, you know? There was another life that didn't involve them, moments of dropping in and out, and a woman who stayed over the years because it was what good women were supposed to do.

What's a little unfair treatment in marriage when you have been blessed with children? That's what they tell women, isn't it? To stay, to endure, to chin up and "not let women outside move completely into their home."

As if the responsibility for keeping a home is one that rests on the shoulders of the woman alone. As if any detour from that idealized family unit will be a burden for her to carry for the rest of her life. It often is. A burden she has to carry, that is. Because this is a society that often fails to recognize the full spectrum of the humanity of women. Because shame is a potent tool that works effectively on women.

She stayed. She didn't rock the boat.

I wish she did. By God, I wish she did.

Because now she's dead and sometimes, I think about what kind of life she might have lived, the kinds of journeys she might have embarked on, and the many versions of herself she might have found in the process.

But she didn't embark on those journeys, and sometimes, I catch my mind running a loop around the questions, "That's it? She's gone?"

All of that pain, that staying, and she's just…gone.

In 2018, I started sharing my thoughts on violence against women, notably domestic violence, publicly. In a world where we are inundated with news of women who have died at the hands of their spouses, I struggled to understand why a woman would still choose to stay for years with a partner who relentlessly abused her.

Why couldn't she just leave?

And then one day, a comment to one of such posts asked me a simple question, "you are constantly asking these women to 'leave to live' and exit abusive marriages. That's okay but what happens to these women after then?"

I was not unaware. However, this person brought to fore the economic challenges that acted as a shackle for many women and kept them rooted in abusive partnerships. Some of them didn't have any job or business because their husbands expressly forbade it or they married partners who believed homekeeping was the primary and singular preserve of women.

They would be stranded, along with their children. They would likely be

abandoned by a husband and extended family who would punish them for daring to choose self above others. While it was clear cut for the rest of us not in that situation, it was anything but for those women.

And so in 2019, I started The Butterfly Project and made the tagline, *for women and girls*. I partnered with a training organization in Ibadan, SkillNG, to train women in skills like Graphics Design and 3D Animation at no cost to those women.

Over the course of this constantly evolving journey, we have worked with a woman who did, indeed, leave an abusive marriage with her 2 children. We worked through the legal end of leaving, started a business for her, got her child into school, and it has been a joy to see her unfurl into her own person.

'Leave to live' IS a worthy message. It always will be. But there is a need to provide women with one of the tools that empower them to choose themselves.

We need to do more of that.

My mother has two girls.

Well, hardly girls at this point.

A few years ago, we were having a conversation about a friend my mom seemed to have suddenly severed ties with and cut from her life. Apparently, this woman had told her she didn't think it was natural that my father didn't marry a second wife. How could he have stayed with just her all these years when she didn't have a boy?

India, Mexico, South Africa – are countries with some of the highest levels

of femicide in the world. All around the world, women are murdered for the crime of being females and possessing a vagina. Here, in Nigeria, 2020 has been a study in breathing deep and devising new ways to maintain sanity in the face of an onslaught of rape cases and femicide.

What does this have to do with the woman who decided my father didn't have children because he had two girls? Everything.

Rape and other forms of violence against women, are primarily about power. It is about taking something from someone because you think you can. By constantly treating the existence of women as a footnote, we give permission for people to disregard women's autonomy and their rights to their bodies. It is why we have men who "punish" women for the crime of indecent dressing by raping them.

I read about a mother who had a surgery and was advised by the doctor to abstain from sex for a specified period of time, I think it was about 3 months. This adult woman then asked her daughter to keep the family unit sacred by having sex with her father. If she refused to do this, the woman told her daughter, her father would sleep with someone else and that would be terrible. What was she there for, this girl child, if her daddy had to solicit for sex outside the home?

You think that is an extreme example. I understand. But is it?

We should pay more attention to how bad things are. We should all be aware that rape and other forms of violence against women are normalized in our society, and some of their roots can be found in the pervasive elevation of sons above daughters for the specific reason that they are boys. Rooted in the idea that women and girls are somehow less because of their gender.

We must pay more attention, and we must take active steps to stop it.

In 2017, I worked with a firm that provided consultancy services to small businesses and we held periodic trainings on different subject matters for small business owners.

During one such training, it started raining heavily and didn't let up even after the training was over. So some of us started a conversation.

We talked about many things I can't recall. But I do remember the young lady who looked to be about my age that I drifted into conversation with for a while.

She was a make-up artist and was at a crossroad. She had just concluded her one year mandatory National Youth Service Corps Scheme and didn't know what she wanted to do next. Make-up was something that came naturally to her and it paid the bills so she wanted to stick with it for a while.

In school, she had wanted to study Engineering but her father did not consider that a course suitable for a female so he chose something else for her. One of the things that stayed with me after that conversation was how unsure she sounded most of the time. She ended most of her statements with invisible question marks, as if she was waiting for someone to validate the words that had come from her. I imagine a lifetime of having your life designed on the premise of your gender will do that to you.

She didn't get a chance to study her course of choice, not because she wasn't good enough but because she was a girl. It didn't matter what she wanted; she was a girl.

How do we not see that the way we parent girls has a direct correlation to the women they grow into and their ability or otherwise to take up space in this world?

How do you tell a girl from the moment she is old enough to understand words that good women are supposed to be wives, and then magically expect that she will divorce her abusive husband rather than choose to die at his hands?

How is it that you expect women will step up to the challenge of the highest offices in the land, when the girl is constantly told that her configuration by nature is that of an assistant and not a leader?

How do you wage an honest war against all forms of violence against women and girls when you have cultivated a society that relentlessly blames the victim for a crime committed against her and has no word for the perpetrator?

The answer is you don't.

We must do things differently.

I became a feminist before I knew what the word meant.

Because even the child somehow knew that outside the bubble of her nuclear family, this society is not configured to have the backs of women and girls.

I have my sisters' backs. I am on my own team.

I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't.

- Audre Lorde

14 My Feminist Journey

Ujenyu Joy Sani

When I think about feminism, one of the images that shows up in my head is related to war. With feminism, a warrior, alternating between being the aggressor and the defendant. Some days, feminism picks up her sword, her shield, her helmet, her breastplate and rushes into battle, the sun glinting off the shiny metal and a war cry belting from deep inside her. On other days, she is seen in tattered armour, tail between her legs, bloodied, beaten, weary and headed for the mountains where she is left for dead.

For how else can one describe this centuries old war for the rights of a woman to be seen as wholly human? How best can one describe this seemingly never ending battle to be valued as equally as other members of society?

It is what happens in my own life, every single day. The constant pressure I am under to remind the people I encounter that I am as human as my neighbour of the opposite sex. Some days, I shed off that pressure. I do not wish to be the warrior, the teacher, the advocate and so I settle, I shy away,

I let peace reign.

I let peace reign by accepting the sexual slurs, the condescension, the disrespect.

I was lucky enough to grow up in a home where my sex was not wielded as a tool for oppression. Where I was not saddled with certain chores simply because I was female. Where my brother was not given extra privileges simply because he was a boy.

I only found out that girls were supposed to play quietly, do domestic chores and take all action in service of their future husband's house when I started mingling with other children. And even this exposure never really made an impact on me. So I grew up, semi-sheltered, believing it was alright for me to play football, climb trees, cycle at breakneck speed, love books, enjoy wearing pretty dresses, newly done hair or colourful accessories. I was just a child who liked to have fun in the many ways she could find.

The first time I was told to behave like a girl, I was genuinely confused. And for days, I wondered what I had done wrong. The sharp retort had come from my teacher while I was playing ball with the boys. She suggested that I act like a girl and go play *Suwe*. I did like *Suwe*. I was very good at it, too. But I also liked to dribble a ball and I was one of the fastest runners. All the other kids said so. How had I become a boy simply by playing ball?

In my home, we never had the sex talk. No one sat me down to explain how I was female and biologically different from a boy, and so I was really afraid I had done something wrong by playing football. I was even more scared of my mum finding out I was no longer a girl. So, I quit football. During recess, while the other kids called me to the football field, I would

pretend not to see or hear them and instead run to where the girls were playing *Suwe*. But you see, *Suwe* never felt the same again and I stopped enjoying the game.

As I grew older, I witnessed different variations of that conversation I had with my primary school teacher. I was told to speak softly. To wear earrings. To not laugh so heartily. To walk like a lady. And it made me feel wrong. I never ran out of well intentioned volunteers who told me I was very smart but I needed to be modest. The boys in class were encouraged to solve quantitative problems on the board and demonstrate their knowledge of equations during Physics lessons, but I was often called a show-off for participating actively and competitively.

At home, my dad never stopped emphasising my abilities, encouraging me, pushing me to be fierce, dream big, and make use of what he fondly called my "big brain".

Imagine my confusion when it was alright to race my brother and climb trees in the yard at home but outside, it was not.

By the time I got to the University, I was conflicted. I was the weird girl, the one who didn't dress exactly right or sound exactly right. I had all these notions that girls should do what they chose and not what they were told to do. I also got triggered often. I found out that girls couldn't be presidents of the departmental and faculty associations or head religious fellowships. It was rare to have a girl elected class representative. These things made me angry, and it was at that point I started devising ways to have conversations around gender equality with my peers. I didn't know exactly what I was doing, but I knew I had to do something.

Now, I know this is not the experience of all females the world over. But where I am from, women are primarily the home makers and men are

still generally expected to be breadwinners. Women can hardly aspire to actively take part in the processes that lead up to taking up political office. Women captains of industry are few and far between. The socio-economic situation has deteriorated over the past few decades, a reality that leaves women even more disadvantaged. After years spent working at lower paying jobs or not even working at all in order to be able to work lesser hours so they can be available to rear the kids, the career growth of women is usually stunted in comparison to their male counterparts, leaving them economically less empowered.

I have had to intensify the amount of work I do now in anticipation of a time when I would have to slow down on my career goals in order to raise my own child(ren). It is a sad reality, but for a lot of us, it is our reality here.

In Nigeria, women may have a right to vote, to own businesses and to live without the supervision of a male, but there are multiple instances where I feel like I am being seen as less. I am badgered for not changing my surname to my husband's. We are still fighting for the right to inherit the properties of the primary men in our lives. Male heirs are perceived as more worthy than female heirs. To be male is to be more valuable, more seen, more important.

Biology differentiates males from females. This is true. Men are generally physically stronger than women. Women have the ability to carry and feed offspring. However the roles that physical differences have given the sexes are primal roles. In today's world, a woman should not be confined to childbearing and child rearing without a choice in the matter. We should be past this already, yet it features so prominently in conversations around equality. How can we spend so much time debating such basics when we should have moved on to more nuanced exchanges?

In all the years I have fought for the right to have a choice, I have several stories to tell. Of sexual assault, glass ceilings, and discrimination based on sex. But there is a particular incident, a few years ago, that sits at the center of my consciousness. I had gone to pitch a potential client who I had been communicating with for some time and I was feeling pretty confident with my proposal drawn up and double checked. I met with the Executive Director, a man, and it went very well. Or so I thought. While the gentleman walked me to the gate, he slipped an address into my palm and said it was the last stage of discussions before a contract was drawn up. The address on the paper looked residential, so I asked what that particular meeting was about. He smirked and said I would be proving my competence where it really mattered. It struck me then, that it didn't really matter to this man that I had spent weeks convincing him about my competency. It wasn't just corruption or abuse of power. It was that he saw me, this woman, and thought that my body was a price I should pay for an opportunity I had proven competent for.

That day, I was not angry. Today, I feel as I felt that day: numb.

Yes, I fight. I advocate and educate. I refuse to be treated as less because of my sex but on many days, I am numb and unable to put up a fight. I am numb because these acts of violence that happen simply because of my sex have happened one too many times and I am tired.

I have faced roadblocks and giants on my path as a business woman. The one way I have been able to represent the struggle for equality and fair representation is simply to keep at it. I soldier on in the hopes that a little girl will listen to me speak one day and take it for granted that a female can do as much as I have done. That she can do as much as I have done, and even more.

Teach her never to universalize her own standards or experiences. Teach her that her standards are for her alone and not for other people. That is the only necessary form of humility: the realization that difference is normal.

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

15 Feminism as Freedom: To Try, To Choose, To Be.

Zainab Haruna

What am I?

I am breeze,

Blowing tenderly across lovers' cheeks

Hurricane, whipping through town, bliss

I am gurgles and chuckles from the mouth of babes

Gargles and wrinkles from withered limbs

I am this and many more

I am the calm ocean

The soothing sea

Whipped up into a storm

Broken boats and limbs delivered on the shore

Still that is me.

I am outspoken, fiery, needing to be seen

Yet shy, modest, pulling upon my sleeves

I am girl, wife, sister, and mother

I am all things and nothing

The world sees me today

It did not yesterday

Will it tomorrow, I cannot say

For then, I am unsure what I

Might have become

I am fluid

I am uncertain

Tag, I am human

One evening in 2017, I found myself sitting across from Funmi Iyanda, one of Nigeria's most accomplished media practitioners, in a packed hall in Kings College London. We were debating the definitions of feminism. I cannot recall how I learned about the event, only that I was excited about meeting Funmi, and learning from her.

To be honest, I was not there out of a driving need to learn about feminism. I was there because I thought it would be nice to connect with someone from back home, to sit in a room with someone who shared the identity, Nigerian, and reminded me of home.

I didn't know it then, but that event would turn out to be a turning point in my views about feminism.

In 2020, I set out a personal plan to try out different things. I was going to try yoga, get a new apartment, apply for short courses, visit more African countries, maybe even join a gym. Some of the plans were big, some small, and all of them were significant to me, the individual. I was eager to try out new things.

As the year progressed, my enthusiasm dipped and waned. Some of my plans I diligently followed through on. Some, I abandoned. Yet, others gave way to completely new plans.

The freedom and flexibility with which I made my plans, changed them, and refined them again is completely reminiscent of my perspective on feminism, which positions the individual as the chief protagonist in their own life.

I am passionate about the freedom of people to make the decisions that affect their lives to the extent that those decisions do not infringe on the rights and freedoms of others; to the extent that the individual is not denied access to relevant information, knowledge, tools and skillset as everyone else with no preferential treatment or discrimination.

When feminists say women's rights are human rights, this is what we mean. That the rights of women, as humans, should never be denied or subjected to the whims of others. Certainly not the whims of men.

There are two rooms, A and B.

In Room A, a puzzle is drawn on a board and the time allocated for participants to solve it is 20 minutes. However, some participants are not

allowed into the room. Instead, they have to take turns craning their necks through the window in order to see the board and attempt the puzzle.

In Room B, all participants are allowed into the room, given a seat, ample time and resources to attempt the puzzle.

Room A is the world as we have it, with barriers limiting access to tools and resources for women to establish themselves and live lives of meaning. These barriers could be cultural, religious, or institutional in nature.

Room B, on the other hand, is the world that feminists are working hard to deliver. A world where gendered barriers are eliminated and gender equality is achieved for the betterment of women specifically and society in general.

Society says here are boxes. Boxes for men and boxes for women. Feminism asks, why do these boxes exist? What purpose do they serve? Do these boxes benefit the people in them or the spectators outside them? Feminism says, let us open a door to these boxes so people can choose where they fit in. Society says, you must not ask questions, you must stay in the box. Feminism says, we will not. These boxes do not represent many of us and we want the choice to step out of them if we so wish.

How does society respond to this? Well, it says that feminists are troublesome and bent on bringing destruction and chaos to the world.

Choice is a bargaining chip, one that gives power to the people who experience and exercise it. Feminism ensures that women (and men) are not discriminated against in accessing the power of choice.

Choice is freedom. Freedom to education. Freedom to decent work. Freedom to make the choice to own properties or not. Freedom to travel. To be an astronaut. To be an athlete. To own a company or several

companies. To work in the mines and Fortune 500s. Freedom to explore. Freedom to be a homemaker or a worker. Freedom to be whoever you want to be, starring as the lead role in the movie of your life.

Choice is freedom to make decisions for your own life.

Choice is freedom. Feminism is choice and feminism is freedom. This was the most important lesson I took away from that evening with Iyanda in 2017. That we have rights, and we are not less. That we are whole human beings, capable of charting our own course, capable of rational thought, and complex decisions. That our existence is not a whim, and therefore as humans with agency, we should not be subject to the whims of others. And most importantly, that women should not be subject to blanket expectations, but recognised as capable of independent submissions regarding our lives and existence.

In 2019, I was on holiday in Kigali, hopping a bus to Kampala, Entebbe, and back to Kigali. My reading companion during that trip was a book titled "*It's Not About the Burqa,*" a compilation of essays and stories by Muslim women depicting their perspective on feminism and its intersection with Islam. These stories were unique, funny, interesting, poignant, sad, passionate but most importantly, they were diverse. They further represented a documentation of women's stories told from their own perspective of the intersection of their religion and feminism.

I found it a powerful book, and an important one.

I wanted to work on a similar project with African women as a compilation of African women's stories around feminism. When I returned to Nigeria, I started writing to different African women about putting together a similar body of work. For African women to explore the intersections of feminism and gender with religion, tribe, ethnicity, culture, career, family

and the continent. Six months after my return, the project kicked off and for the next six months, these amazing women from across the continent shared their stories and essays, which developed into the body of work you are reading today.

For me, feminism is a proposal for women to take up their space without apologies or handouts, thriving on merit and zero discrimination environments which, realistically, are not absolutely guaranteed in human governed systems. Therefore, feminism for me, is also a call to dismantle discriminatory systems and barriers that prevent women from taking up relevant spaces and living decent lives.

That is my feminism.

All work that moves us toward the goal of zero discrimination against women is important work. As in every movement, in advocating for gender equality, different tools will be used. Feminists will utilise their platforms and myriad skill sets in service of the end goal.

There will be those who create art about the issues we face.

There will be activists who march to demand for equal rights and fairness.

There will be those who create laws to eliminate discrimination in society.

There will be business executives who enforce equal opportunity within their companies.

There will be social changemakers who focus on eroding gendered barriers.

It will take everyone contributing in their own way to get us where we need to go.

For the past two years, I have been doing more work with women, and women – led households in low-income communities. To achieve social

and economic liberation for women, we need to ensure that women in disadvantaged communities get more support frameworks to help them realise financial autonomy, as this is key to achieving better social and economic outcomes for them. I work with community partners to identify women living in these conditions, especially widows, and offer food packets in addition to loans and grants to support their businesses and expand their skill set. So far, we have worked with over 200 women across more than ten communities in two states in Nigeria.

Poverty is not just about being poor but also about lacking freedoms, dignity, and choice. Poverty limits the choices of women and makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, to live lives of meaning, to thrive and grow, women must have the power to choose and in order to ensure that, we must strive to lift more women out of poverty.

It is just as important that as we do this, we do not take away the agency of women. Too often, development practitioners assume that we know what is best for people without speaking to them. To continue the work of improving the lives of vulnerable women, we must design interventions with them, and not for them.

My friend, Victoria, says that too often we see the success of women through the lens of individual achievements and ignore the exclusion that persists for billions more around the world. I agree with her. In every room and table that matters, women continue to be under-represented. From company boards, to politics and law-making, representation of women leaves more to be desired. We must continue to use our platforms to speak on different issues that affect women, as well as showcase stories of other women.

Balance is needed in the world to avoid chaos, and it is true that everyone

has a role to play in maintaining that balance. But what we all need to understand, is that balance is not gendered. We have roles to play and such roles do not come prescribed to us based on the colour of our skin and certainly not on the basis of our gender. Women must be allowed the full agency to design their own lives without interference or discrimination.

This is how each of us will find the spaces that truly belong to us and it is that belonging, and the thriving in that belonging that will uphold the balance.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu is a poet and essayist from Nigeria, whose work has appeared on Populа, Ake Review, Lolwe, Arts and Africa, After The Pause journal, Bitter Oleander, 20.35 Africa, Memento, and elsewhere. She is a 2018 fellow of Ebedi Writers Residency.

She has an LLB from Bayero University, Kano, and is currently getting her BL from the Nigerian Law School. A two-time shortlistee of the Nigerian Students Poetry Prize, she has been a guest at literary festivals and panels such as the Ake Festival and the Kaduna Book and Arts Festival.

Passionate about northern and women representation and amplification, in 2018 she was an associate producer of season 4 of the popular Hausa TV show “Haske Matan Arewa”; a program that aired on Arewa24 on Wednesdays, interviewing and showcasing exceptional northern Nigerian women and their work to the word.

Amanda Tayte-Tait aka Amanda Marufu is a Feminist, Tech- Entrepreneur, TV Producer, Blogger & Author of ’At What Age Does My Body Belong To Me?’

Co-Founder and CEO of Ed-Tech company SMBLO,

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Follow her @mandytait52 on social media or subscribe to her blog on amandataytetait.com

Borso Tall, an independent social worker from Senegal, is the founder and coordinator of the Young Advocates for Human Rights network - YAHR. Her guiding ethos is her vision of a world in which human rights are promoted through quality education. She is one of the 1000 young African leaders who won the 2016 Mandela Washington Fellowship, the flagship program of President Obama's Young African Leaders Initiative, and in 2017, she was awarded the Chevening Scholarship, the UK government's global scholarship program. She has recently completed a postgraduate degree in Equality and Human Rights from the University of Glasgow in Scotland and is currently completing a PhD in English Studies at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. She dedicates her writings to raise awareness about women and children's rights across Africa.

Linda Tusiime is a professional in joint venture administration working in Kampala, Uganda. She is an avid writer, a lover of music and the arts in all its forms. She is also a survivor of breast cancer, 3 years in remission, and is now involved in raising awareness about the illness and projects to help others, through her

foundation: Lumps Away Foundation.

Chineme Ezekwenna is a multilingual Igbo-American who has worked in the areas of international development / education and marketing on three continents. She is passionate about racial / gender justice, indigenous language promotion, African travel, and the self-determination of Black folk worldwide. Igwe bụ ike (there's strength in unity)!

Victoria Malowa is a development consultant born and raised in Kenya. Her passion is to become a meaningful social change agent. She always has an interesting book in hand. When not absorbed in tidying, because someone must do it anyway, she can be found taking long walks in the park and sometimes spends too much time watching documentaries.

Makalay Saidatu Sonda nee Mansaray was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa. She holds a Bachelor of Arts with Honours degree in Mass Communication from Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone and a Master of Science degree in Agricultural Extension and Rural Sociology from Njala University, Sierra Leone. She currently works as Research and Teaching Assistant at Njala University.

Makalay is very passionate about women and girl child empowerment (especially rural women and

girls), gender equality and equity. She is a gender and reproductive health activist, and she has led and participated in several campaigns against sexual and gender based violence, reproductive health etc. She is the Founder and Director for Moonteen, a community based organization that seeks to empower rural girls through reproductive health and sex education, girls' rights, creating safe spaces, mentorship, community engagement and advocacy - all geared towards ending teenage pregnancy and child marriage. Through her advocacy, she has spoken on many issues such as sexual violence and abuse, menstrual hygiene management, period dignity, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and teenage pregnancy. In addition, she has written published articles on FGM and maternal and child mortality in leading newspapers in Sierra Leone such as Politico. Also, she has written several articles that are published on her personal blog website. Makalay loves poetry and she writes poems as a hobby.

She is a member and the Head of Media at Feminists United Sierra Leone and Allies, an organization that serves as a movement of young people who are social change actors with the collective goal of inspiring equality. She is also a team member of the #Iamkadija Movement; a movement that sprung up in Sierra Leone after a five-year old girl was raped and murdered. She is also a mentor in the mentorship program of Strong Women Strong Girls (SWSG). An organization that uses mentorship among other things as an initiative to empower girls and young women. Lastly, Makalay is married and she is a Christian.

Nana Sule is the author of the children's book: A New Name. She writes from Kano, in North- Western Nigeria. Her life and works revolve around promoting Women's rights and Environmental Protection. Outside of these, she enjoys events planning, hunting chocolates and trying on abayas.

Nneamaka Nwadei is a writer, performer and youth advocate. She is a television presenter at the Nigerian Television Authority, Lagos. She has a Bachelor's degree in Dramatic Arts from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state. Her hobbies include writing, experimenting with food, creating audio and visual content, and visiting new places on a whim.

She is passionate about inspiring people to continually discover who they are and all that they can be. She volunteers with SheDecides Nigeria, a movement advocating for the sexual reproductive health and rights of the female.

An avid reader, Nneamaka explores the interconnectedness of the human nature through several art forms. On a constant journey of self-discovery, Nneamaka believes in impact over activity. In her spare time, she loves to create designs and short videos.

Ojonwa Deborah Miachi has eight years' experience in developing, supporting and managing programmes and projects focused on equitable access to quality education, child protection, gender equality, citizens'

engagement, as well as accountability and transparency through strategies such as advocacy, community mobilization, and evidence-based research. As a result of these experiences, she has garnered skills in project management, mobilization, stakeholders' management, research, as well as monitoring and evaluation using qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Ojonwa completed her Bachelors' degree in Economics (BSc) from Bingham University, Nigeria (2011), and master's degree in development management (MA) from the Institute of Development Research and Development Policy, Ruhr University, Bochum Germany in Partnership with the University of Western Cape, South Africa (2017).

Priscilla Sena Bretuo is a Ghanaian who is passionate about education, social innovation and development in Africa. She graduated with an MSc in Development Studies from the London School of Economics (LSE) and a BA in Political Studies from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana. She is a scholar of the LSE Programme for African Leadership (PfAL) and editor for Future Africa Forum (a think tank focused on innovation, development and policy in Africa). She is currently a doctoral student at Cambridge University in the UK. Prior to her doctoral studies, she worked with the African Leadership University as an Associate Lecturer in Social Sciences. Priscilla loves reading, writing, teaching, music, art and travelling

Sokhna Mbathio Thiaw currently works as an administrative assistant in WARC (West African Research Center), a center for academic exchange between Americans and West African scholars that encourages research on the region of West Africa. She holds a BA in American Literature and right now is pursuing a Master's degree at the English Department of the University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar. Since she is very much interested in feminist issues, her dissertation is on feminism in American Literature with a focus on how black women, portrayed through literature, struggle to make themselves a place in the American society. Sokhna's favorite writers are Mariama Ba, Warsan Shire, Alice walker, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Lalah Delia to name but a few.

Tawakalit Kareem is a communications professional and advocate for gender equality. She works in communications across non-governmental organizations that focus on women and gender-based violence. Tawakalit is an alumnus of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI); an ambassador, Africa4Her; a member of the Commonwealth Youth Gender Equality Network; a 2020 ONE Nigeria Champion; and a member, 2019 Class of PEIFFund, Inc.

Her works on gender equality and peace, particularly in the African context, have been published on reputable platforms in Nigeria and Ghana. She has also reviewed issue papers on topical subjects in the development

sector for the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI).

Tawakalit is the founder of The Butterfly Project (TBP), a not-for-profit initiative that provides free digital skills training for young women, free menstrual pads to girls and provided direct funding to about 200 families with women breadwinners across underserved communities during the Coronavirus lock down. Her work with The Butterfly Project has been featured by the United Nations Children's Fund's 'Voices of Youth', The Nigeria Youth Sustainable Development Goals Network, and Nigerian Tribune.

Ujenyu Joy Sani is a serial entrepreneur, cofounding a few business enterprises which include; 2k Ankara Tops (a fashion brand with a mission to share Africa with the world), Outbox Business solutions (a consultancy with a focus on building viable startups) and, Going Orange (an Agricultural produce marketing business).

She also founded All Things Nigerian square, a digital marketing company.

She is passionate about creating jobs and making even the playing field for women entrepreneurs. Her other passions include working with Simply Poetry to deliver live shows, stage productions, videos, audio CDs and workshops based primarily on the manipulation of Poetry and working with Ideacon Africa, a leading ideas management portal in Africa.

Zainab Haruna is a development practitioner with a motivation to build enabling systems for women and young people to thrive. She has worked in different capacities to address a variety of development challenges including poverty, education, job creation, corruption, and service delivery issues in Nigeria. She has initiated and lead intervention projects at national and sub-national levels, coordinating with stakeholders in the private sector, civil society, and the public sector.

Zainab is the founder of Soup N Stew, a not-for-profit that supports the most vulnerable women and women-led households with relevant resources as well as expand opportunities for the voices of women and girls to be captured in the design of solutions to improve their social and economic wellbeing.

THE COMPILATION TEAM

Omolayo Nkem Ojo was born in Nigeria, grew up in the US, and raised by the world. Omolayo Nkem Ojo is a research analyst in international development and a strategic communications consultant. Her research covers migration, remittances and the African diaspora. She is passionate about intercultural communications and dismantling the patriarchy. Omolayo has lived in several countries around the world and enjoys helping small brands take their stories to a global audience.

Isatou Jallow is a communications professional, blogger and feminist with keen interest in visual storytelling. She has worked with different organizations and agencies that enhance the capacities of young people and address issues women & girls are faced with.

Isatou is the co-founder of Equals Now – a feminist collective and Catch Them Young – a child focused organization in The Gambia. She maintains a needed safe space for women, girls and children to be heard, be seen and thrive.

Tawakalit Kareem is a communications professional and advocate for gender equality. She works in communications across non-governmental organizations that focus on women and gender-based violence. Tawakalit is an alumnus of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI); an ambassador, Africa4Her; a

member of the Commonwealth Youth Gender Equality Network; a 2020 ONE Nigeria Champion; and a member, 2019 Class of PEIFFund, Inc.

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