

We Should All Be Feminists

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

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

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

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



Now fast-forward to some years later.

In 2003, I wrote a novel called *Purple Hibiscus*, about a man who, among other things, beats his wife, and whose story doesn't end too well. While I was promoting the novel in Nigeria, a journalist, a nice, well-meaning man, told me he wanted to advise me. (Nigerians, as you might know, are very quick to give unsolicited *advice*.)

He told me that people were saying my novel was feminist, and his advice to me – he was shaking his head sadly as he spoke – was that I should never call myself a feminist, since feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands.

So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist.

Then an academic, a Nigerian woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, that

feminism was un-African, and I was only calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books. (Which amused me, because much of my early reading was decidedly unfeminist: I must have read every single Mills & Boon romance published before I was sixteen. And each time I try to read those books called 'classic feminist texts', I get bored, and I struggle to finish them.)

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

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



Now here's a story from my childhood.

When I was in primary school in Nsukka, a university town in south-eastern Nigeria, my teacher said at the beginning of term that she would give the class a test and whoever got the highest score would be the class monitor. Class monitor was a big deal. If you were

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

Then, to my surprise, my teacher said the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier; she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second-highest score on the test. And *he* would be monitor.

What was even more interesting is that this boy was a sweet, gentle soul who had no

interest in patrolling the class with a stick. While *I* was full of ambition to do so.

But I was female and he was male and he became class monitor.

I have never forgotten that incident.

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

