

# Sociolinguistic Analysis of TED Talk “We Should All Be Feminists”: A Feministic Perspective

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<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.1.73>

## Abstract

*This research paper examines the complex interplay between language, feminism and social expectations through the sociolinguistic analysis of “TED talk ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,” taken as a sample. The dialogues used in the talk were transcribed. The study explores the use of the Nigerian English dialect in Adichie’s talk, highlighting its cultural authenticity and the effect of language on propagating feminist ideals. Through descriptive and qualitative methodology, the study challenges conventional gender norms expressed in the speech, shedding light on social variables such as language use, culture, power dynamics and gender inequality. Besides this, the paper focuses on reshaping social expectations and abandoning gender discrimination. It contributes significant insights into gender studies and linguistics, underscoring the vitality of language in social progress and in shaping feminist discourse. Hence, comprehending the power of language to shape perspectives enables one to foster inclusivity and challenge biases. Therefore, this study is crucial for advocating social change and empowering individuals to reshape and challenge entrenched gender norms. Overall, this research highlights universal issues of social justice and gender stereotypes. It ensures solidarity in the struggle for gender equality globally by examining the intersection of feminism, language and culture.*

**Keywords:** Liberal Feminism, Societal Norms, Women Empowerment, Patriarchal Society, Gender Stereotypes.

## Introduction

The feminist movement gained significance in the late 19th and early 20th century and emerged as a response to the widespread injustices faced by women. It addresses traditional gender norms that prescribe particular expectations from individuals based on their gender. Feminism promotes the idea that societal expectations should not bind individuals. Moreover, it also highlights gender wage gaps and domestic violence that hinder women's career advancement. This movement also fosters a sense of solidarity among females, providing a platform for women to collaborate with them to bring a distinct change. Women have achieved much through this movement, but some issues remain unaddressed. The culture of male intolerance compromised the rights of females. Women's movements emerged during the struggle for national independence and enhanced quality of life. Feminism in Nigeria garnered interest due to several efforts by women to ensure equal opportunities and rights for both genders. In Nigeria, the problem of domestic violence is still prevalent. The victim is accused rather than the one who was tortured. There are chauvinistic

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practices such as honor killing, forced marriages and female circumcision. Feminism enables girls to make their life choices and implement them bravely. Despite whatever feminism has achieved in Nigeria, the word 'feminist' is still used as an insult. Women do not want to call themselves feminists. Feminism in most African countries, including Nigeria in particular, is often viewed as something marginal, and feminists are aggressive and untidy in their personal lives.

This TED talk was delivered by Chimamanda in 2012. She was born in Nigeria. Her works primarily revolved around race, gender, identity and the complexities of contemporary African society. Through her contributions, she addressed the issues of feminism, immigration, colonialism and the struggle for personal freedom. She critically highlighted the social expectations placed on women. Adichie's feminism is profound as it encompasses the intersectionality of gender with culture, class and race. Her writings advocated for social justice and gender equality, encouraging readers to raise their voices against traditional gender norms. Her talk initiated a global discussion about feminism and became a book in 2014. In the respective talk, feminism is highlighted through compelling arguments for gender equality. Adichie demonstrated liberal feminism in her speech, advocating for gender equality in life. Her talk is a call to action, forcing the audience to identify gender biases in their experiences. By promoting equal opportunities, nations can thrive, thus making feminism a case for social prosperity.

TED is a platform that shares presentations in over a hundred languages, covering all topics, including global issues. TED is popular because it is easily accessible worldwide, visually appealing and engaging, provides new perspectives, and fosters intellectual discussions. Early research was done on several talk shows and motivational speeches. TED talks are innovative due to their emerging fame. This particular talk by Adichie is chosen for sociolinguistic analysis because the patterns in the talk reflect feminism and gender discrimination. Performing a sociolinguistic study of the given talk can provide insights into cultural context, language use and gender equality. It will help comprehend how linguistic choices reflect social dynamics. The analysis helps us understand the talk's contextual and cultural relevance. The study provides insights into how context and culture shape feminist discourse. The analysis highlights how linguistic features and cultural norms shape Ngozi's message reception.

Additionally, it shows how language reflects the speaker's identity as a feminist, African and woman. Exploration of the talk reveals that it can be related globally, not only to particular cultures and communities. Through contemporary discussion on gender, this study helps readers understand the evolving nature of feminism. Besides this, it will aid educators in teaching students about the intricate relationship between gender, power dynamics and language. Overall, the sociolinguistic analysis of this TED talk highlights the interplay between culture, feminism, and language, contributing to its richer comprehension.

### **Research Objectives**

- To explore how language use reflects identity in the TED Talk.
- To explore how feminism impacts social expectations.
- To explore gender roles portrayed in the talk.

### **Literature Review**

Language is utilized on different occasions. Language, skills and behaviors vary in different speech communities (Brenzinger, 2017). Social interaction relates to the activity of talking to people. This activity will be more successful if it is encouraged by other factors such as situation and attitude (Jabeen, 2011). Language affects people's identity and behavior. However, the close association

between society and language was acknowledged in the middle of this century (Hudsin, 1985). Sociolinguistics is an area of applied linguistics. Using stratified forms of speech and explaining nature are the main jobs of sociolinguistics (Emike et al., 2021). Sociolinguists assert that language tackles texts that makeup communication. The focus turns from sentence to the act of communication (Yousaf, 2004). When we first encounter people in a social context, we speculate about where they come from based on their spoken language. Such observation leads to a fuller understanding of people, which may or may not be correct.

Sociolinguistics incorporates different lines of research, including the analysis of local accents and dialects (Bayyurt, 2013). Wardhaugh (2000) stated that in sociolinguistics, the interplay between vocabularies, using specific languages and the societal role of males and females using those languages is examined. The topic of gendered language forms the same denominator of feminist sociolinguistics (Ergun, 2010).

Moreover, sociolinguistics and feminist discourse are large areas of study, and both can overlap. In a feminist critique, a woman gives an overall worldview and provides a basis for comprehending language in all areas of life, such as spiritual, economic, political and cultural (Karamarae, 1986). (Cameron, 1992) argued that words themselves are neither sexist nor nonsexist; however, their impact depends on how they are used in particular discussions. Language can be a tool for both oppression and empowerment. Women should use language to bring social change and be aware of manipulation by male-dominant situations.

TED is a non-profit organization. The talks are addressed online and typically range from ten to twenty minutes. TED talks are translated into over a hundred world languages and have over a billion views (Wingrove, 2017).

The term feminism is mostly misperceived. It is a mix of different perspectives that agree on comprehending unfairness related to sexuality and gender (Bucholtz, 2014). The form of feminism manifested in this TED talk is liberal feminism. Its primary goal is to promote equity among males and females in social life. Hence, it does not change the community but offers equitable female access. It seeks to bring females into the male sphere; liberal feminism has minimized gender differences (Bucholtz, 2014). Chimamanda is a well-known author whose works deal with issues that emerged from four waves of feminism. She is a Nigerian writer who has dealt with violence, sexism, and racism significantly in her novels "Americanah, half of a yellow sun and purple hibiscus." Besides her fictional works, Adichie addressed global women's rights in an essay, "We should all be feminists and a feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions" (Božić, 2020).

In the fictional narrative "Half of a yellow sun," Adichie clarifies a notion of radical feminism and urges women to gain education and political power to overturn the patriarchal base of society (Oyeleke, 2023). Her novel "purple hibiscus" exposed the African picture of ideal women who remained dumb despite victimization and violence (Ann, 2015). Adichie raised concerns related to the alterity and centrality of females in America who acted like consumers and producers in the market characterized by the economic and political system of a male-dominated society. (Iromuanya, 2018). Colman, (2013) explained that in "the feminist manifesto", the concept of time aids in breaking free from the patriarchal system. This innovative way of looking at time helps us to revive feminism.

The sociolinguistic study conducted on a YouTube video revealed the types of code-mixing. Intra-sentential code-mixing was the most common, and pronunciation change was less common (Astri, 2020). Another study analyzed language styles employed by Jimmy Fallon in his show. The results indicated that 29 conversations contained style about Joos's theory, with casual style being the dominant one (Muziatun, 2020). Advertising language helps advertisers reach the target audience

and affects consumers' purchasing attitudes (Akinbode, 2012). Women are victims of injustice and discrimination in most parts of the world. The evils perpetrated against girls do not allow them to take part in better jobs, military positions and developmental programs (Chinwuko, 2020). The study explored one formal register, four casual and six consultative styles in the Ted Lasso series' pilot episode.

Moreover, participants, ends, instrumentalities, and act sequences occurred in the ethnography of communication (Mardiana, 2023). Integrating Ted Talks in education promotes students' listening skills and learning autonomy in ESL classrooms (Puspita & Amelia, 2020). TED talks provide relevant content that makes teachers aware of best practices, new future possibilities and current issues (Rubenstein, 2012). The study (Diabah, 2023) investigated how YouTube comments on Adichie's talk reflected gender ideology, revealing instances of insults and pejoratives. The rise of Adichie to fame is viewed as the commercialization of feminism and the dismantling of patriarchal principles by black feminism (Lascelles, 2021). The study questioned Chimamanda's description of masculinity. The research went further than the limitations symbolized by the cage as a sign of masculinity. It paved the way for necessary interventions (Diabah, 2022).

No research has been conducted on the sociolinguistic analysis of a TED talk. However, other studies focus on the sociolinguistic analysis of fashion journalism, movies or seasons, YouTube talk shows, etc. Admitting the gap, TED talks are innovative, valuable and rich resources for research due to their easy accessibility, diverse perspectives, credible speakers and global reach.

### **Research Methodology**

The research method applied in this study was qualitative and descriptive. Qualitative methodology is well suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth understanding and exploration of complex social phenomena such as power dynamics, language use, culture, and gender equality.

This approach allows a researcher to deal with the richness of individual experiences, language and context, thus contributing to a profound understanding of the topic. A video clipping of the "TED talk 'We should all be feminists' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie" was taken as a sample. The dialogues used in the talk were transcribed. This research dealt with sociolinguistic analysis of the mentioned TED talk to explore social variables such as gender equality, language use, culture and power dynamics. The talk is re-watched to confirm the context and validate the occurrence of social variables. Comprehensive information about the speaker's identity and societal expectations about gender roles are investigated through analysis. The study seeks to challenge and unveil gender-based stereotypes. Reflecting on feminism aids in raising awareness about issues women face, fosters positive change in society and promotes gender equality. The talk delivered diverse perspectives on feminism to better understand its complexities and impact on various communities.

### **Data Analysis**

"Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her Ted talk, 'We should all be feminists,'" incorporated elements of her Nigerian English dialect that added authenticity to her speech and established her identity as a Nigerian. When speaking to an audience of diverse backgrounds, Nigerian English helps create a sense of solidarity and reliability among people from the same cultural background. Adichie's use of the Nigerian dialect relates to her self-identity, and she feels pride in using it. She employed certain colloquial expressions in her speech, such as *kaka Melaka* and phrases like *the thing whey dewy worries me*, translated as *the thing that bothers me* in Nigerian English. Such

expressions gave a personal touch to her speech. Moreover, Adichie's intonation and pronunciation carried certain linguistic features, such as rhythm, particularly in the Nigerian English dialect. These nuances contributed to the richness of her communication style.

"We teacher them to mask their true selves, because they have to be hard man." The phrase hard man in Nigerian English refers to a male's toughness. It is a man who seeks prestige by spending money. This showed the typical gender role of males in our society. Another common expression in Nigeria is, "I did it for peace in my marriage". Men and women commonly use this whenever they compromise their dreams to save their marriage.

"She has been taught to be a good wife material or very homely." In this sentence, the word homely denotes a woman who performs all her traditional household chores perfectly and the woman who is fit for marriage according to society. "Some people will say, oh! But women have the real power, bottom power." Adichie explained that for other people, bottom power meant that women use sexuality to get favors from men. However, in Nigerian English, women can draw power from others whenever needed. Thus, Chimamanda's use of such linguistic expressions emphasized the universality of the issues discussed, bridging cultural gaps.

Moreover, she eloquently explained the significance of feminism in today's world. By sharing personal experiences, she challenged social expectations placed on men and women in today's world. For example, females are expected to be submissive, while males are expected to be dominant and emotionally suppressed. By abandoning these stereotypes, Adichie encouraged individuals to question these limiting beliefs. It fostered the idea that feminism is related to women and affects everyone.

Furthermore, this talk helped reshape social expectations where people are not confined by their gender and are independent in pursuing their passions and dreams. In the respective TED talk, certain instances reflected social expectations about feminism such as "You know; you are a feminist. It was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone, the same tone you would use to say something like, you are a supporter of terrorism."

In specific contexts, referring to someone as a feminist is often perceived negatively due to deeply ingrained traditional and cultural beliefs about gender roles. Feminism advocates for gender equality, hence challenging these norms, which can be viewed as a threat to established social structures. Additionally, there are also some misconceptions associated with feminism. Some people view it as radical and anti-men. These misconceptions are perpetuated by religious and cultural beliefs and also through the portrayal of feminism by the media. It is due to this fact that calling someone feminist is perceived as an insult or derogatory remark. "A journalist advised me that I should not call myself a feminist because feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands."

The perception that feminists cannot find suitable husbands is rooted in societal expectations. Some people believe that feminists are outspoken, independent and assertive. Such traits are unsuitable for women to play the traditional role of a housewife as these are intolerable by male folk. It is also considered that feminism diminished the role of men, which is not valid. Therefore, such beliefs can impact the image of feminists in relationships. "We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves because they must be hard men!"

Societies have assigned particular roles to males and females. Men are supposed to be unemotional and stoic. They are taught at a young age that vulnerability is a sign of weakness. Growing up, they adopt a tough exterior to align with social expectations. Parents often discourage boys if they openly express sadness or fear. These expectations have negative consequences as they can lead

to mental health issues. Therefore, challenging gender-based norms contributes to fulfilling lives for individuals regardless of gender.

“The more “hard man” the man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is. And then we do a much greater disservice to girls because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of men.” Women are expected to be accommodating. In a relationship, females are pressured to prioritize men’s needs over their own. In most of the cases, women are financially dependent on men. They seek economic security from men, due to which women have limited options. They cannot take any stand, and they have to serve the lower self-esteem of men. Feminism highlights that it is significant to break these stereotypes and foster relationships based on mutual respect where both individuals are valued.

“A woman at a certain age who is unmarried, our society teaches her to see it as a deep, personal failure. And a man at a certain age who is unmarried, we just think he hasn’t come around to making his pick.” It is a common belief that women should marry and bear children at a young age, which puts women under pressure to marry early, but this is not the case with men. Moreover, a woman’s prestige is associated with her marital status and ability to maintain a family. Feminism advocated the autonomy of women in making decisions about their own lives. It gave them the liberty to make choices that aligned with their desires.

Adichie encouraged people to reconsider their preconceived notions about feminism and bear more inclusive attitudes regarding gender roles. Gender stereotypes consist of characteristics, activities and psychological traits appropriate to men and women. In Africa, men are stereotyped as dominant, while females are stereotyped as submissive. Stereotypes relate to the culture that shapes the values of a particular community and group. Hence, Adichie critiqued how gender roles limit both men and women. She advocated for liberal feminism because it aligns with her belief in empowerment and equality of individuals. Liberal feminism emphasized equal opportunities, treatment, and rights for males and females. Adichie commended liberal feminism in “We should all be feminists” to challenge traditionally rooted gender norms. She pointed out specific examples which featured traditional gender roles, as depicted below:

“Then, to my surprise, the teacher said that the class monitor had to be a boy.” In some cultures, certain positions are deemed more suitable for men. It is a widespread notion that men must hold leadership because they are more capable of it. Moreover, this is why fewer female leaders are running the country. Such practice signified a patriarchal society where males are considered superior power over women. Additionally, a class monitor has the autonomy to write the names of noise makers and report the misbehaving students to the teacher. So, assigning leadership roles to men can reinforce gender inequality. Therefore, it conveyed a message that women are not as capable, which is unjust and hinders development and societal progress. Feminism strives to challenge these norms and promote inclusive policies for men and women to participate in such positions based on their qualifications, regardless of gender.

“And he, this man who was very grateful and happy took the money from me, looked across Louis and said, ‘thank you sir!’”

Adichie narrated an incident when she gave her own hard-earned money to a person, and he, instead of thanking her, thanked the boy with her. It was due to the standard view that males are always the breadwinners and females are confined to household chores, and if women have any money, it comes from men. These conventional norms have contributed to the idea that financial resources are in control of men. However, it is significant to note that this belief only reflects societal norms, not reality. Today, women actively participate in workplaces and generate income by excelling in various professions. In patriarchal societies, men are always credited for being

breadwinners. This is outdated, as both genders perform diverse roles in improving their family's economic conditions.

“They just don't let you in if you're a woman alone, you have to be accompanied by a man. Each time I walk into the Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores me.”

These lines indicated unequal treatment faced by women. Women face exclusion in their daily life experiences. They are only addressed if accompanied by a male. The behavior of the waiter reflected a deep-seated gender bias where women are perceived as unworthy of respect and attention when alone. This lack of acknowledgement is very hurtful for women as they feel dismissed. Marginalization of women hampers their active participation in political and social spheres of life, therefore hindering society's progress. By sharing her daily life experiences, Adichie called for the urgent need for a feminist perspective in society “You should aim to be successful, but not too successful otherwise you would threaten the man.”

Although women are encouraged to aspire to success, an underlying implication is that this success should be moderated. This depicted the traditional belief that women should prioritize family and not overshadow men in terms of achievement or status. In addition, this statement demonstrated that women's success could challenge male dominance and be inferred as male emasculation. There are also power dynamics between genders. The idea of women being successful reinforces the existing power imbalance. Men have fragile egos and worth, which can be damaged by a woman's success, thus manifesting men as a superior lot. It is believed that women should curb their ambitions and should not disturb the established social order. Hence, feminism strives to establish a more equitable society where women are not judged based on gender.

“When the boy is hungry, the parents say to the girl, “Go and cook Indomie noodles for your brother”

This statement suggested gendered division within a family setting. It is a conventional belief that cooking food is the responsibility of women. Also, this instruction emphasized the idea of serving male family members, thus implying men's entitlement and women's subservience. This stereotype limits men from doing household chores and women from pursuing careers outside the house. When girls are told their foremost duty is to look after the house, it indirectly trains them to associate their self-worth with domestic work. This hampers their ambition. This statement also demonstrated injustice to female folk. If girls are hungry, they have to cook for themselves, while if boys are hungry, they get a cooked meal. Here, men's needs are prioritized over women's. Feminism, therefore, presents a view that both males and females should be encouraged to learn these essential life skills which can empower them.

“Yes, rape is wrong. But what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?”

This illustrates that the woman is at fault for being in a room with four boys. This highlighted the victim-blaming mentality of society, which held women accountable for every misdeed. It showed the double face of society where men are given more freedom and their lustful actions are justified in some way, whereas women are expected to be more cautious about their choices. By questioning girl's presence instead of boys' actions, the idea undermined the autonomy of girls. It exhibited that women should be controlled, which limits their independence. In a patriarchal society, sexual violence is justified based on the victim's behavior. Hence, feminism should be improvised so that women should be treated with dignity regardless of gender.

“If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about our son's girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid.”

Parents are open and show acceptance for their sons' relationships, but when it comes to their daughters, they are reluctant to acknowledge it. This portrayed that men's relationships are less threatening than women's. The control is rooted in patriarchal beliefs where women are perceived as the property of their fathers until they are transferred to the ownership of their husbands. Moreover, women's choices are evaluated more critically than men's and their sexual behavior reflects their family's reputation and honor. This creates a feeling of shame in women, which prevents them from establishing healthy relationships.

## Findings

The findings from the TED talk "We should all be feminists" revealed important insights into social expectations, gender stereotypes and the significance of feminism in challenging these norms. Ngozi creatively intertwined cultural references, personal anecdotes and societal observations to highlight the complexities of gender dynamics in society. Firstly, Adichie's Nigerian English dialect creates a sense of solidarity for a diverse audience. It reflects the vitality of accepting one's cultural identity while raising a voice for social change. She negotiates how societal expectations pressure individuals to follow rigid gender norms, like the expectation for men to be dominant and for women to be subordinate. By questioning these norms, Adichie motivated people to reject the limiting beliefs imposed on them by society. There are certain misconceptions due to underlying biases which surround the word 'feminism', such as negative connotations that feminists are unhappy because they cannot find suitable husbands. Through social commentary and personal narratives, the speaker illustrates how traditional gender roles perpetuate inequality, limit personal agency and foster harmful behaviors and attitudes. The talk sheds light on females' unequal treatment in different aspects of life, from personal relationships to professional opportunities. Individuals should be given equal facilities to follow their dreams and passions without being confined to traditional gender norms. Feminism helps to reshape social attitudes and gender norms. It is about promoting women's rights and breaking the systematic inequalities that affect all genders. By defending liberal feminism, which asserts equal rights for all, Adichie encouraged a more equitable and inclusive society.

Moreover, the gendered division of labor within the family prompts reflection on the impact of culture on gender roles. Thus, she criticized such stereotypes and advocated a more progressive approach to gender roles. Adichie emphasized the vitality of changing mindsets. By embracing feminist ideals and challenging harmful notions and victim-blaming attitudes, societies can progress further. She underscored that feminism is a movement for females and all genders. By breaking the rigid gender roles, individuals can thrive and pursue their passions without barriers.

## Conclusion

In the "TED talk, "We should all be feminists" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," liberal "feminism" is demonstrated through different and persuasive narratives. Through her personal experiences, Chimamanda emphasized the importance of feminism in dismantling social expectations. She encouraged individual choice, emphasizing the vitality of women's rights to make their own decisions and choose their life paths. She tackled the issue of gender discrimination in education, highlighting the significance of equal access to learning opportunities. Moreover, Adichie challenged traditional gender roles by fostering the rejection of social norms that bound women to particular behaviors. She supported fair economic opportunities, hence promoting females' financial independence. She incorporated an interconnected perspective, identifying various experiences of women based on class, race and other social factors.



Additionally, she represented principles of liberal feminism by championing equal opportunities and individual freedom and dismantling gender-based barriers. Adichie's compelling narrative emphasized feminism as a global cause, fostering the vitality of diverse perspectives and paving the way for an egalitarian future.

The study yielded a nuanced understanding of the interplay between gender, language and societal norms. It illuminated how language both sustained and reflected the existing gender inequalities. The study explained how specific phrases and words embedded in social discourse reinforced the conventional gender roles. Language can be a potent tool for confidence and self-expression, and women can use it expressively to embrace their voices. Conclusively, there is a need for linguistic transformation. Language should be evolved to encourage paradigm shift by promoting inclusivity and challenging biases. The research powerfully resonates within the context of feminist sociolinguistics, highlighting the need to redefine language as an effective instrument for fostering gender equality and breaking down the entrenched patriarchal system.

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