

## When We Don't Listen

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie made a positive impact with her call in the **TED Talk We Should All Be Feminists** and in her **pamphlet** of the same title that for all our sakes we should all work towards gender equal cultures.



Recently, after she gave an **interview to Kathy Newman on Channel 4 News (10 March 2017)**, a barrage of condemnation broke loose around her. The interviewer asked her if it mattered how one arrived at being a woman and, particularly, whether a trans-woman who grew up enjoying the privileges of being a man is any less a woman.

Here's her response:

*"When people talk about, "Are trans women women?" my feeling is trans women are trans women. I think the whole problem of gender in the world is about our experiences. It's not about how we wear our hair or whether we have a vagina or a penis.*

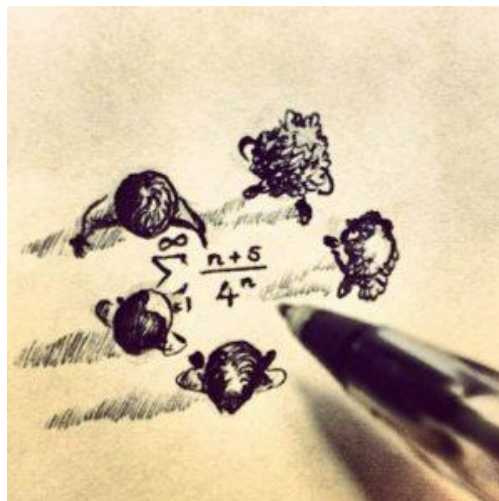
*It's about the way the world treats us, and I think if you've lived in the world as a man with the privileges that the world accords to men and then sort of change gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning as a woman and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are.*

...

*I don't think it's a good thing to talk about women's issues being exactly the same as the issues of trans women because I don't think that's true."*

In an overall interview about a number of topics lasting only 4.5 minutes, this was reasonably clear, one might have thought, especially as she had been critical of the wrongful use of binary categories.

Her core point was about "the whole problem of gender" being about **experiences** – "the way the world treats us". From that premise she explained that she did not see the **experience** of a (non-trans) woman as being the same as a man who has "been accorded those privileges that men" enjoy and then transition to becoming a woman.



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How could the **life experiences** be the same? There is too much variability for that without crude aggregation of people. That is not much different from saying that the **life experiences** of everyone are different – no two people are exactly alike – a daily reality, one would think. It was sufficiently clear what she meant in the interview context, although it might have been clearer – and better for avoiding argy-bargy – had she qualified her statement about 'us' with the parenthetical adjective above, i.e., referred to 'non-trans women', rather than 'women'.

Nevertheless, people rounded on her on **the basis of the implication which they drew that her position was that trans-women aren't 'real women'** and she was called transphobic.

Adichie posted an elaboration on **her Facebook**:

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*"I see how my saying that we should not conflate the gender **experiences** of trans women with that of women born female could appear as if I was suggesting that one **experience** is more important than the other. Or that the **experiences** of trans women are less valid than those of women born female. I do not think so at all — I know that trans women can be vulnerable in ways that women born female are not. This, again, is a reason to not deny the differences.*

*Why does this even matter?*

*Because at issue is gender.*

*Gender is a problem not because of how we look or how we identify or how we feel but because of how the world treats us.*

*Girls are socialized in ways that are harmful to their sense of self – to reduce themselves, to cater to the egos of men, to think of their bodies as repositories of shame. As adult women, many struggle to overcome, to unlearn, much of that social conditioning.*

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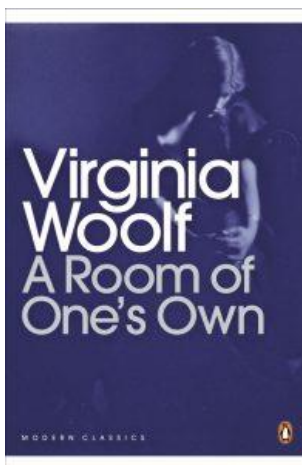
*A trans woman is a person born male and a person who, before transitioning, was treated as male by the world. Which means that they **experienced** the privileges that the world accords men. This does not dismiss the pain of gender confusion or the difficult complexities of how they felt living in bodies not their own" (emphases added).*

The point Adichie was making in the short interview does not require getting into debates over gender categories and classifications or the biological dimension of people diversity.

Finally, Adichie's goal, whether one agrees with it or not, was clear to anyone listening to her interview: gender equal cultures.

The hostility, which is now a feature of public 'debate' and does no good for anyone, certainly precludes any thoughtful engagement with the real issue at the core of her distinction: the different gendered life experiences people have, how they arise, how we process them, and their consequences for people.

The critics were not listening to Adichie who was making the simple, and obvious, observation that the **life experiences of 'trans women'** were different from the life experiences of 'non-trans women' even in today's world. The critics were addressing the different question about who should be considered as a 'women – a matter of categorisation about which Adichie did not say anything in the interview. **Nevertheless they drew the inference that she said something she did not say and then proceeded to castigate her for their own statement.**



The critics were operating, in the metaphor of Virginia Woolf In a *Room of One's Own* (1929), from the **red heat of emotion** rather than the **white light of truth** in relation to Adichie's broadcast interview. They seemed to be listening to react, not to understand her points and engage in a genuine dialogue with her.

How often does this happen in conversations every day, not just in direct conversation with some person, but also during indirect conversation with an author we are reading or in correspondence with someone?

There was no dialogue with Adichie in the case above. Dialogue involves **listening**, first of all, and **inquiring** of the other with an attitude of **being open to a change of mind** on the basis of the interchange.

A dialogue would surely have been more enlightening for the rest of us if less immediately gratifying of some immediate needs for the critics.