

We Should All Be Feminists

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00:03

So I would like to start by telling you about one of my greatest friends, Okoloma Maduewesi. Okoloma lived on my street and looked after me like a big brother. If I liked a boy, I would ask Okoloma's opinion. Okoloma died in the notorious Sosoliso plane crash in Nigeria in December of 2005. Almost exactly seven years ago. 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.

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I was about fourteen, we were at his house, arguing. Both of us bristling with half bit knowledge from books that 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.

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(Laughter)

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I could tell from his tone, the same tone that you would use to say something like, "You're a supporter of terrorism."

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(Laughter)

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

01:23

Now fast forward to some years later, I wrote a novel about a man who among other things beats his wife and whose story doesn't end very well. While I was promoting the novel in Nigeria, a journalist, a nice, well-meaning man, told me he wanted to advise me. And for the Nigerians here, I'm sure we're all familiar with how quick our people are to give unsolicited advice. He told me that people were saying that my novel was feminist and his advice to me -- and he was shaking his head sadly as he spoke -- was that I should never call myself a feminist because feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands.

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(Laughter)

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So I decided to call myself "a happy feminist." Then an academic, a Nigerian woman told me that feminism was not our culture and that feminism wasn't African, and that I was calling myself a feminist because I had been corrupted by "Western books." Which amused me, because a lot of my early readings were decidedly unfeminist. I think I must have read every single Mills & Boon romance published before I was sixteen. And each time I tried to read those books called "the feminist classics," I'd get bored, and I really struggled to finish them. But anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided that I would now call myself "a happy African feminist." At some point I was a happy African feminist who does not hate men and who likes lip gloss and who wears high heels for herself but not for men.

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(Laughter)

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Of course a lot of this was tongue-in-cheek, but that word feminist is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage. You hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, that sort of thing.

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Now here's a story from my childhood. When I was in primary school, 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. Now, class monitor was a big deal. If you were a class monitor, you got to write down the names of noisemakers --

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(Laughter)

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which was having enough power of its own. But my teacher would also give you a cane to hold in your hand while you walk around and patrol the class for noisemakers. Now, of course you were not actually allowed to use the cane. But it was an exciting prospect for the nine-year-old me. I very much wanted to be the class monitor. And I got the highest score on the test. Then, to my surprise, my teacher said that the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier because she assumed it was ... obvious.

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(Laughter)

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A boy had the second highest score on the test, and he would be monitor. Now, what was even more interesting about this is that the boy was a sweet, gentle soul who had no interest in patrolling the class with the cane, while I was full of ambition to do so. But I was female and he was male, and so he became the class monitor. And I've never forgotten that incident.

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I often make the mistake of thinking that something that is obvious to me is just as obvious to everyone else. Now, take my dear friend Louis for example. Louis is a brilliant, progressive man, and we would have conversations and he would tell me, "I don't know what you mean by things being different or harder for women. Maybe in the past, but not now." And I didn't understand how Louis could not see what seems so self-evident. Then one evening, in Lagos, Louis and I went out with friends. And for people here who are not familiar with Lagos, there's that wonderful Lagos' fixture, the sprinkling of energetic men who hang around outside establishments and very dramatically "help" you park your car. I was impressed with the particular theatrics of the man who found us a parking spot that evening. And so as we were leaving, I decided to leave him a tip. I opened my bag, put my hand inside my bag, brought out my money that I had earned from doing my work, and I gave it to the man. And he, this man who was very grateful and very happy, took the money from me, looked across at Louis and said, "Thank you, sir!"

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(Laughter)

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Louis looked at me, surprised, and asked, "Why is he thanking me? I didn't give him the money." Then I saw realization dawn on Louis' face. The man believed that whatever money I had had ultimately come from Louis. Because Louis is a man.

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Men and women are different. We have different hormones, we have different sexual organs, we have different biological abilities. Women can have babies, men can't. At least not yet.

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(Laughter)

06:28

Men have testosterone and are in general physically stronger than women. There's slightly more women than men in the world, about 52 percent of the world's population is female. But most of the positions of power and prestige are occupied by men. The late Kenyan Nobel Peace laureate, Wangari Maathai, put it simply and well when she said: "The higher you go, the fewer women there are." In the recent US elections we kept

hearing of the Lilly Ledbetter law, and if we go beyond the nicely alliterative name of that law, it was really about a man and a woman doing the same job, being equally qualified, and the man being paid more because he's a man.

07:11

So in the literal way, men rule the world, and this made sense a thousand years ago because human beings lived then in a world in which physical strength was the most important attribute for survival. The physically stronger person was more likely to lead, and men, in general, are physically stronger. Of course there are many exceptions.

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(Laughter)

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But today we live in a vastly different world. The person more likely to lead is not the physically stronger person; it is the more creative person, the more intelligent person, the more innovative person, and there are no hormones for those attributes. A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, to be creative, to be innovative. We have evolved; but it seems to me that our ideas of gender had not evolved.

08:05

Some weeks ago, I walked into a lobby of one of the best Nigerian hotels. I thought about naming the hotel, but I thought I probably shouldn't. And a guard at the entrance stopped me and asked me annoying questions, because their automatic assumption is that a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone is a sex worker. And by the way, why do these hotels focus on the ostensible supply rather than the demand for sex workers? In Lagos I cannot go alone into many "reputable" bars and clubs. 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 a Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores me. The waiters are products --

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(Laughter)

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At this some women felt like, "Yes! I thought that!" The waiters are products of a society that has taught them that men are more important than women. And I know that waiters don't intend any harm. But it's one thing to know intellectually and quite another to feel it emotionally. Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. I feel upset. I want to tell them that I am just as human as the man, that I'm just as worthy of acknowledgment. These are little things, but sometimes it's the little things that sting the most.

09:24

And not long ago, I wrote an article about what it means to be young and female in Lagos, and the printers told me, "It was so angry." Of course it was angry!

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(Laughter)

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I am angry. Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change; but, in addition to being angry, I'm also hopeful. Because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better.

10:00

Gender matters everywhere in the world, but I want to focus on Nigeria and on Africa in general, because it is where I know, and because it is where my heart is. And I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world, a fairer world, a world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently. We do a great disservice to boys on how we raise them; we stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way, masculinity becomes this hard, small cage and we put boys inside the cage. 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 have to be, in Nigerian speak, "hard man!" In secondary school, a

boy and a girl, both of them teenagers, both of them with the same amount of pocket money, would go out and then the boy would be expected always to pay, to prove his masculinity. And yet we wonder why boys are more likely to steal money from their parents.

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What if both boys and girls were raised not to link masculinity with money? What if the attitude was not "the boy has to pay" but rather "whoever has more should pay?" Now, of course because of that historical advantage, it is mostly men who will have more today, but if we start raising children differently, then in fifty years, in a hundred years, boys will no longer have the pressure of having to prove this masculinity. But by far the worst thing we do to males, by making them feel that they have to be hard, is that we leave them with very fragile egos. 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. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller, we say to girls, "You can have ambition, but not too much."

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(Laughter)

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"You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you would threaten the man." If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, you have to pretend that you're not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him.

12:38

But what if we question the premise itself? Why should a woman's success be a threat to a man? What if we decide to simply dispose of that word, and I don't think there's an English word I dislike more than "emasculatation." A Nigerian acquaintance once asked me if I was worried that men would be intimidated by me. I was not worried at all. In fact, it had not occurred to me to be worried because a man who would be intimidated by me is exactly the kind of man I would have no interest in.

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(Laughter)

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(Applause)

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But still I was really struck by this. Because I'm female, I'm expected to aspire to marriage; I'm expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. A marriage can be a good thing; it can be a source of joy and love and mutual support. But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same?

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I know a woman who decided to sell her house because she didn't want to intimidate a man who might marry her. I know an unmarried woman in Nigeria who, when she goes to conferences, wears a wedding ring because according to her, she wants the other participants in the conference to "give her respect." I know young women who are under so much pressure from family, from friends, even from work to get married, and they're pushed to make terrible choices. 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.

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(Laughter)

14:27

It's easy for us to say, "Oh, but women can just say no to all of this." But the reality is more difficult and more complex. We're all social beings. We internalize ideas from our socialization. Even the language we use in talking about marriage and relationships illustrates this. The language of marriage is often the language of ownership rather than the language of partnership. We use the word "respect" to mean something a woman shows a man but often not something a man shows a woman.

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Both men and women in Nigeria will say -- this is an expression I'm very amused by -- "I did it for peace in my marriage." Now, when men say it, it is usually about something that they should not be doing anyway.

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(Laughter)

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Sometimes they say it to their friends, it's something to say to their friends in a kind of fondly exasperated way, you know, something that ultimately proves how masculine they are, how needed, how loved. "Oh, my wife said I can't go to the club every night, so for peace in my marriage, I do it only on weekends."

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(Laughter)

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Now, when a woman says, "I did it for peace in my marriage," she's usually talking about giving up a job, a dream, a career. We teach females that in relationships, compromise is what women do. We raise girls to see each other as competitors -- not for jobs or for accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about our sons' girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid.

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(Laughter)

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But of course when the time is right, we expect those girls to bring back the perfect man to be their husbands. We police girls, we praise girls for virginity, but we don't praise boys for virginity, and it's always made me wonder how exactly this is supposed to work out because ...

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(Laughter)

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(Applause)

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I mean, the loss of virginity is usually a process that involves ...

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Recently a young woman was gang raped in a university in Nigeria, I think some of us know about that. And the response of many young Nigerians, both male and female, was something along the lines of this: "Yes, rape is wrong. But what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?" Now, if we can forget the horrible inhumanity of that response, these Nigerians have been raised to think of women as inherently guilty, and they have been raised to expect so little of men that the idea of men as savage beings without any control is somehow acceptable. We teach girls shame. "Close your legs." "Cover yourself." We make them feel as though by being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot see they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think, and they grow up -- and this is the worst thing we did to girls -- they grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form.

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(Applause)

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I know a woman who hates domestic work, she just hates it, but she pretends that she likes it, because she's been taught that to be "good wife material" she has to be -- to use that Nigerian word -- very "homely." And then she got married, and after a while her husband's family began to complain that she had changed.

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(Laughter)

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Actually, she had not changed, she just got tired of pretending.

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The problem with gender, is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are.

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Now imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations. Boys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates the differences and then it becomes a self-fulfilling process. Now, take cooking for example. Today women in general are more likely to do the housework than men, the cooking and cleaning. But why is that? Is it because women are born with a cooking gene?

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(Laughter)

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Or because over years they have been socialized to see cooking as their role? Actually, I was going to say that maybe women are born with a cooking gene, until I remember that the majority of the famous cooks in the world, whom we give the fancy title of "chefs," are men.

19:22

I used to look up to my grandmother who was a brilliant, brilliant woman, and wonder how she would have been if she had the same opportunities as men when she was growing up.

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Now today, there are many more opportunities for women than there were during my grandmother's time because of changes in policy, changes in law, all of which are very important. But what matters even more is our attitude, our mindset, what we believe and what we value about gender. What if in raising children we focus on ability instead of gender? What if in raising children we focus on interest instead of gender?

20:00

I know a family who have a son and a daughter, both of whom are brilliant at school, who are wonderful, lovely children. When the boy is hungry, the parents say to the girl, "Go and cook Indomie noodles for your brother."

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(Laughter)

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Now, the daughter doesn't particularly like to cook Indomie noodles, but she's a girl, and so she has to. Now, what if the parents, from the beginning, taught both the boy and the girl to cook Indomie? Cooking, by the way, is a very useful skill for boys to have. I've never thought it made sense to leave such a crucial thing, the ability to nourish oneself --

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(Laughter)

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in the hands of others.

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(Applause)

20:45

I know a woman who has the same degree and the same job as her husband. When they get back from work, she does most of the housework, which I think is true for many marriages. But what struck me about them was that whenever her husband changed the baby's diaper, she said "thank you" to him. Now, what if she saw this as perfectly normal and natural that he should, in fact, care for his child?

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(Laughter)

21:13

I'm trying to unlearn many of the lessons of gender that I internalized when I was growing up. But I sometimes still feel very vulnerable in the face of gender expectations. The first time I taught a writing class in graduate school, I was worried. I wasn't worried about the material I would teach because I was well-prepared, and I was going to teach what I enjoy teaching. Instead, I was worried about what to wear. I wanted to be taken seriously. I knew that because I was female I will automatically have to prove my worth. And I was worried that if I looked too feminine, I would not be taken seriously. I really wanted to wear my shiny lip gloss and my girly skirt, but I decided not to. Instead, I wore a very serious, very manly and very ugly suit.

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(Laughter)

22:03

Because the sad truth is that when it comes to appearance we start off with men as the standard, as the norm. If a man is getting ready for a business meeting, he doesn't worry about looking too masculine and therefore not being taken for granted. If a woman has to get ready for business meeting, she has to worry about looking too feminine and what it says and whether or not she will be taken seriously.

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I wish I had not worn that ugly suit that day. I've actually banished it from my closet, by the way. Had I then the confidence that I have now to be myself, my students would have benefited even more from my teaching, because I would have been more comfortable and more fully and more truly myself. I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and for my femininity.

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(Applause)

22:59

And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be. Gender is not an easy conversation to have. For both men and women, to bring up gender is sometimes to encounter almost immediate resistance. I can imagine some people here are actually thinking, "Women too do sef." Some of the men here might be thinking, "OK, all of this is interesting, but I don't think like that." And that is part of the problem.

23:29

That many men do not actively think about gender or notice gender is part of the problem of gender. That many men, say, like my friend Louis, that everything is fine now. And that many men do nothing to change it. If you are a man and you walk into a restaurant with a woman and the waiter greets only you, does it occur to you to ask the waiter, "Why haven't you greeted her?" Because gender can be --

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(Laughter)

24:08

Actually, we may repose part of a longer version of this talk. So, because gender can be a very uncomfortable conversation to have, there are very easy ways to close it, to close the conversation. So some people will bring up evolutionary biology and apes, how, you know, female apes bow down to male apes and that sort of thing. But the point is we're not apes.

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(Laughter)

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(Applause)

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Apes also live on trees and have earthworms for breakfast, and we don't. Some people will say, "Well, poor men also have a hard time." And this is true. But that is not what this --

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(Laughter)

24:53

But this is not what this conversation is about. Gender and class are different forms of oppression. I actually learned quite a bit about systems of oppression and how they can be blind to one another by talking to black men.

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I was once talking to a black man about gender and he said to me, "Why do you have to say 'my experience as a woman'? Why can't it be 'your experience as a human being'?" Now, this was the same man who would often talk about his experience as a black man.

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Gender matters. Men and women experience the world differently. Gender colors the way we experience the world. But we can change that.

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Some people will say, "Oh, but women have the real power, bottom power." And for non-Nigerians, bottom power is an expression which I suppose means something like a woman who uses her sexuality to get favors from men. But bottom power is not power at all. Bottom power means that a woman simply has a good root to tap into, from time to time -- somebody else's power. And then, of course, we have to wonder what happens when that somebody else is in a bad mood, or sick or impotent.

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(Laughter)

26:19

Some people will say that a woman being subordinate to a man is our culture. But culture is constantly changing. I have beautiful twin nieces who are fifteen and live in Lagos. If they had been born a hundred years ago they would have been taken away and killed. Because it was our culture, it was our culture to kill twins.

26:42

So what is the point of culture? I mean there's the decorative, the dancing ... but also, culture really is about preservation and continuity of a people. In my family, I am the child who is most interested in the story of who we are, in our traditions, in the knowledge about ancestral lands. My brothers are not as interested as I am. But I cannot participate, I cannot go to umunna meetings, I cannot have a say. Because I'm female. Culture does not make people, people make culture. So if it is in fact true --

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(Applause)

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So if it is in fact true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we must make it our culture.

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I think very often of my dear friend, Okoloma Maduewesi. May he and all the others who passed away in that Sosoliso crash continue to rest in peace. He will always be remembered by those of us who loved him. And he was right that day many years ago when he called me a feminist.

27:50

I am a feminist. And when I looked up the word in the dictionary that day, this is what it said: "Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes." My great grandmother, from the stories I've heard, was a feminist. She ran away from the house of the man she did not want to marry and ended up marrying the man of her choice. She refused, she protested, she spoke up whenever she felt she was being deprived of access, of land, that sort of thing.

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My great grandmother did not know that word "feminist," but it doesn't mean that she wasn't one. More of us should reclaim that word. My own definition of feminist is: "A feminist is a man or a woman who says --

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(Laughter)

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(Applause)

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A feminist is a man or a woman who says, "Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better." The best feminist I know is my brother Kene. He's also a kind, good-looking, lovely man, and he's very masculine.

29:12

Thank you.

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(Applause)