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April 9, 2024

WHY THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF FEMINISM DO NOT REPRESENT IT

The Cambridge dictionary defines feminism as “the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men.” It seems pretty straight forward. When you read a definition like this it is hard to imagine why anyone would oppose such thing: equal rights for men and women? What exactly is the problem with it? The argument here is that the misconceptions of feminism, so largely propagated, affect it negatively because they make people of all genders feel as if they do not belong to the movement. Analyzing two TED Talks from influential women, Chimamanda Adichie and Betsy Cairo, we can see how even an important movement like feminism can have backlash, and why we still need to support it.

In a powerful TED Talk speech, which was later sampled by Beyoncé, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie uses examples of her life to support her idea that “We Should All Be Feminists.” She remembers how the first times she encountered the word “feminist” were always in situations where the word was used negatively, used to described something “undesirable”, like a man saying to her that she should not call herself a feminist because “feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands” (Adichie, 3). This misconception, that all feminists are unhappy and angry women, among other misconceptions Adichie mentions in her speech lead to her main idea that there is a gender problem that must be fixed. This gender problem can be observed in examples given by Adichie, like unequal payment for women, lack of women occupying positions of power, and even the way we raise the children: while girls are raised to aspire marriage, boys are raised to never show vulnerability. The author talks about gender expectations and how women, from a very early age, are taught to be not too ambitious and even

to shrink themselves in order to “cater the fragile egos of men” (Adichie, 6). According to Adichie, all these ideas of “how things are supposed to be” are internalized from our observation of others, but this can change. She suggests a change in our culture and in the way we raise kids, and she finishes her speech with her own definition of feminism: “a feminist is a man or women who says “yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better.” (Adichie, 10).

An interesting part of Adichie’s speech is a phrase she heard from another African woman saying that “feminism was not our culture, and that feminism wasn’t African” (Adichie, 3). This idea, that feminism is a “Western thing”, is an example of how a flaw inside feminism can make people (men and women) feel excluded from it. This matter dives deeper in what is defined as “white feminism”: the call for equal rights without acknowledging race disparities and the different social necessities of women from different colors and backgrounds. It is already hard for women to occupy positions of power, but for women of color, the challenge is even greater – and if the feminism movement fails in embracing these disparities as well, it will fail in achieving its main purpose of equality. Another important idea from Adichie’s presentation is her affirmation that “gender matters. Men and women experience the world differently” (Adichie, 9). This statement connects with all the examples she gives the audience about certain experiences she only experienced because she is a woman, such as being assumed to be a sex worker when entering a hotel by herself, or not being acknowledged when entering a restaurant accompanied by a man. Gender discrimination is real, and we should be focusing on our differences when discussing this matter because the differences between male and female are still used as a justificative in this system that places men in a superior position in relation to women. This is a big argument around the necessity of feminism but is not as simple as it looks.

Opposing Adichie's claims about gender disparities, the professor and reproductive biologist Betsy Cairo claims that the term 'feminism' does not favor society's fight towards a world more equal to all. In her Ted Talk "Why I Am Not a Feminist," she defends the idea that the word 'feminism' represents a "very strict male or female gender binary" (Cairo, 14) and this polarization gets in the way of our search for equality. In her point of view, the term has been outdated and she suggests a change of language: "if equality is what we want, then 'equality' is the word we should be using" (Cairo 16). She even gives an example of how the term "gay marriage" was replaced by "marriage equality" and thus, became more embracing and equal. She finishes her speech by defining herself as a 'equalist' and explaining that if we keep focusing on our differences, we can never meet a common ground and truly equal society.

Cairo's speech, with all its controversial ideas and shallow examples, is another example of how the misconceptions of feminism affect it. While she refuses to call herself a 'feminist' she enjoys the opportunities that were given to her by other women in the past: as a business owner, PhD holder, writer, and teacher, she could have never achieved any of these titles without the so-called feminist cause. She starts her speech with an incredible valid point: the neutral language and the inclusion of people who does not identify with a specific gender, but instead of focusing on the struggles this group of people face, for example, she changed directions and blamed feminism for being "too gender-binary." Another interesting point is when she mentions an organization called "Women Against Feminism" to point out that some women "don't want what they call 'Radical Feminists' telling them what they can do and cannot do." (Cairo, 15). Ironically enough, such organizations go on the opposite way of Cairo's suggestions since they focus more on male and female roles, and gender differences rather than equality. But Cairo has a point in saying we do not need radical feminists. Extremes are never healthy and, once again, if the feminist

movement focus on dictate how women (or anyone, really) should act or look, then is an exclusionary movement. The misconception that a feminist should not use makeup or high heels, for example, just gives reasons to people to walk away from a movement that should focus on one thing only: fix the gender disparities without excluding any women from any color, nationality, or occupation. Either you choose to be a stay-home parent or a scientist, your gender should not get in the way of your choices.

Both speeches, from Adichie and Cairo, address themes like gender and equality, but they go in opposite ways. While Adichie uses relatable examples to justify that we should all advocate for equal rights, Cairo fails to recognize that we need to acknowledge gender differences and their implications in the society we live in today. When building accessible spaces, we need to acknowledge that some people have different necessities, or when discussing affirmative actions, we need to acknowledge that people from diverse backgrounds face different obstacles because of their race. So why not acknowledge that gender plays a role in favoring a specific group over others? We cannot walk towards equality without accepting the fact that women are still placed as inferior: unequal salary between man and women or the inferior number of women who occupy leadership positions, for example, are facts that cannot be contested.

The misconceptions of feminism affect it negatively by creating this image of a shallow movement that does not embrace every person in the world. And no, feminism is not a flawless movement capable of solving every single problem related to gender, but we should not use these backlashes as an excuse to vilify a movement that could benefit the society as a whole, not only women. Feminism, as defined by the Cambridge dictionary, advocates for equal rights for men and women, and if you oppose to that you should revise your position in this system. Are you a man who benefits from gender disparities? Are you a woman who benefits from the right to vote or

attend university, for example, but doesn't want any association with the feminism movement? In either case, revise your privileges and consider if your twisted vision of what feminism is doesn't come from one of its misconceptions. As mentioned by Adichie: we must do better.

Works Cited

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