

Glen Poole

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The evangelical drive to teach boys to be feminists reached a new high last week with the news that every 16-year-old in Sweden is to be given a free copy of the book “We Should All Be Feminists”.

The short essay, based on a 2013 TED talk by the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has become a sacred text for those who share Yvette Cooper’s belief that “we need our sons growing up as confident feminists”.

So should we welcome the crusaders who wish to convert our male progeny to the “one true Goddess” of gender politics, or should we teach our boys to become free-thinkers who can choose for themselves whether they want to be feminist or not?

As a lapsed male feminist myself, I feel I should start with a confessional.

Firstly, I think Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an extraordinary human being. I defy anyone with an open mind and an open heart to watch her speak and not be impressed by her intelligence, humour, courage, creativity, compassion, self awareness and beauty.

We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston

When she proudly declares: “I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and for my femininity and I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be”, there’s a part of me that wishes I was a strong, black woman so I could whoop along with the Sisterhood.

However, as a straight, white male from working-class roots living a fairly middle-class lifestyle (a demographic one of my mates describes as “half-classed”), I’m left wondering if there is a stage anywhere in the world where a young man could be applauded for saying:

“I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my maleness and for my masculinity and I want to be respected in all of my maleness because I deserve to be!”

It may sound comical but in a truly egalitarian world we would welcome such declarations of male and female empowerment with parity. And yet my personal experience of the feminist worldview that dominates gender politics, is that rather than encourage the empowerment of men, it expects us to apologise for our maleness, our masculinity and our manhood.

So the day I gave up apologising for being my own man – both to socially-conservative traditionalists and to progressive, liberal feminists – was the day I became an unapologetic, card-carrying non-feminist.

TEDxLSE - Glen Poole - A New Gender Agenda

It was one of the most empowering moments in my life. I could write all about my epiphany in a book called “Why We Should All Be Non-Feminists”. Only that wouldn’t work, because to me it doesn’t matter whether you’re talking about religion, sexuality or gender politics, we should all be free to choose what we think.

I believe every child, everywhere in the world, deserves the right to be taught to think for themselves and then use those skills to decide what they want to believe or not believe.

Adichie, for example, has some really interesting beliefs about boys that are worth considering. She says: “We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage.”

And yet her response to this rigid masculine conditioning is to place boys inside a narrow thought cage called “We Should All Be Feminists”.



'We stifle the humanity of boys...' CREDIT: ALAMY

Adichie complains that gender “prescribes how we should be rather than recognising how we are” and yet her prescription for boys is that they should not think for themselves, they should all think feminist.

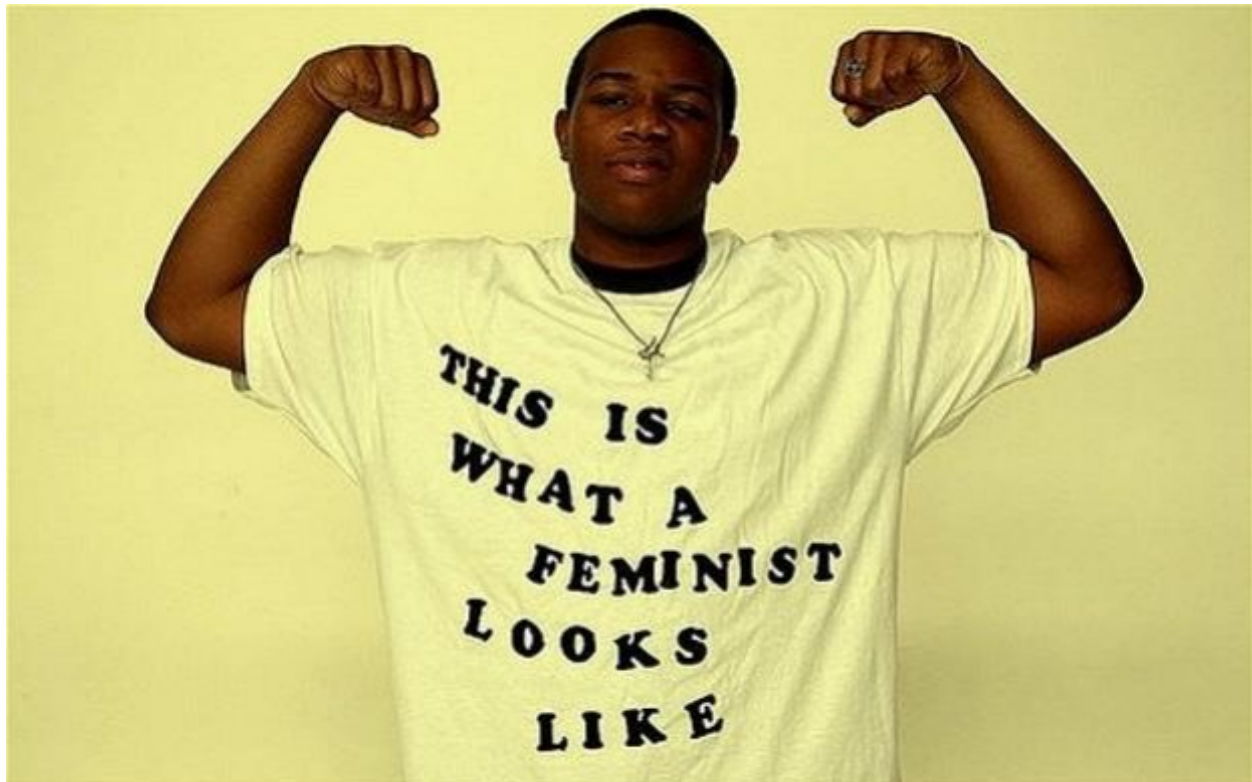
She also argues that a big part of the gender problem is that “many men do not actively think about gender or notice gender”. Yet in reality, men like myself who do notice and speak out about gender are considered a problem by feminists, because we are independent thinkers.

The real problem for feminism is it can't control what men and boys think, feel and say when we speak out about gender issues.

In her brilliant TED talk, Adichie acknowledges that gender can be an uncomfortable conversation and like many missionaries before her, she seeks to place a limit on the topics that savage, non-feminist boys should be allowed to discuss.

“Some people will say, 'well, poor men also have a hard time' and this is true, but this is not what this conversation is about,” she says.

Oh really? Who decided that only feminist matriarchs get to choose what conversations men and boys can and can't have about gender?



'Boys should be free to choose...' CREDIT: TUMBLR

Adiche claims we do a disservice to boys by making them feel “they have to be hard”, leaving them with a “very fragile ego” in the process. This process, she argues, does “a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males”.

There may be some truth in that. It’s also my experience that feminism – with its trigger warnings and its fundamentalist belief that “we should all be feminists” – is the embodiment of a fragile female ego that is incapable of accepting that anyone else (especially men and boys) should be entitled to the privileged position of being considered vulnerable, sensitive and worthy of protection.

Adiche says she wouldn’t be interested in any man who would feel intimidated by her and rightly so. So why does she expect boys to be interested in a fundamentalist approach to gender politics that is so intimidated by reasoned criticism?

I share Adiche’s belief that the world would be a happier, freer place if girls and boys didn’t face the pressure of gender expectations. That’s why I am a proud non-feminist, because one of the greatest gender expectations currently being placed on men and boys is the suffocating belief they we should all become feminists. Boys should be free to choose for themselves whether they want to say YES or NO to feminism.

Glen Poole is the news editor of online magazine insideMAN, author of the book Equality For Men and UK coordinator for International Men's Day.