DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 07.03.2024 | Zikora Ibeh

Cooking — the make or break of feminism

Africa has a dismal record when it comes to the oppression of women. Still, the growth of feminist consciousness in recent years has been remarkable

The reoccurring gender wars on social media unfold like a never-ending drama, where they make the rounds on the menu of public discourse every fortnight, particularly in Nigeria. More than just a trend of contentious tweets and updates, these digital skirmishes expose the entrenched state of gender politics in a country where age-old prejudices, religious dogmas and the modern state work to sustain patriarchy.

Like any battle, these gender wars fought with keypads often break out spontaneously. They could be triggered by something as grave as a rape story or juicy showbiz gossip like the breakup of a celebrity marriage, or even an amusing tweet such as the one by Deborah Adebisi, otherwise known as Mummy Zee. Just a few days into 2024, the pregnant housewife shared how she began waking up at 4:50 am to prepare and pack lunch for her husband despite being pregnant because he mentioned that a female colleague brought an extra spoon to work so they could both eat lunch together.

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When netizens mocked her action as denigrating and dis-empowering, other people infuriated by this backlash – mostly men and supporters of patriarchy – lauded her as embodying true African womanhood, willing to do anything to keep her home. Their approval manifested in a flood of cash donations, which catapulted her into stardom and an overnight millionaire. This demonstration of support further catalysed a wave of endorsements from brands and governmental bodies, offering her everything from luxury housing to cars and high-end kitchen appliances.

Africa, nay Nigeria, has a dismal record when it comes to gender relations and women's oppression. Despite progress in some areas, gender inequalities remain prevalent and deeply rooted. For instance, only one in four parliamentarians and 15 per cent of landholders in Africa are female, while young women are 1.5 times less likely to be employed or undergoing formal education, compared to young men. Also, women face ongoing human rights violations and limited access to education, healthcare, employment, decision-making, leadership, and economic resources. Additional challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, further exacerbate existing inequalities. Moreover, violence against women remains a pervasive issue and has been perpetuated through several socio-cultural practices, which range from child marriages to widowhood rites and female genital mutilation. At least one in three African women experiences physical and sexual violence in their lifetime.

Social Dynamics

'It is hardly surprising that the debate exploded around cooking. Oftentimes, it is what the nuances of it may mean for patriarchal or feminist ideals. The contentions ultimately boil down to what the act signifies in terms of autonomy and power dynamic within relationships', Mary Peluola, Senior Project Manager at Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre, observed.

Historically, and even in contemporary feminist discourse, the hearth place has always been regarded as a millstone around a woman's neck and a place where her dreams are buried. For a new generation of working women in Africa who refuse to be defined by societal expectations of the traditional woman, this debate is crucial in disentangling the threads of oppression woven into these practices and norms.

Accordingly, modern aspirations for women empowerment often consider freedom from domestic chores as a goal. Among an increasing number of educated young women in Nigeria, a prospective partner's conception or expectation of cooking and household could serve as a vital criterion for compatibility or incompatibility. This growing counterculture, while liberating for women, challenges established social order. For many men socialised to avoid tasks considered mundane or traditionally feminine, reassessing these gendered expectations is difficult. Opposing viewpoints are often interpreted as an attack on their masculinity, and a clash between evolving gender identities and traditional expectations is clearly inevitable.

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Sadly, there are women who are stuck in between aspirations and reality and are therefore compelled to make daily compromises. Reacting to this situation, social development advocate Josephine Adokwu says she believes that 'what we choose to do for love is entirely up to us'. Adokwu further said that rather than being chastised, Mummy Zee's tweet actually proved her level of commitment to her relationship, which is her personal decision to make, adding that society can only have a say 'if the woman in question is being forced or coerced to do these things for the reason of domestic, psychological, or physical abuse, or a stringent economic situation in the family.'

In reality, this 'stringent economic situation' (or rather desperate hardship) appeared to have had a hand in Mummy Zee's decision. Two months before her life-changing tweet, Mummy Zee, an unemployed geophysics graduate, had also tweeted her need for a fridge because the night heat was causing her meals to go bad quickly. Pictures of her home showed sparse furniture — an indication of the family's low income. And her husband, a primary school teacher, is part of a layer of Nigeria's workforce that is on the lowest rung of the country's pitiful wage scale, whose average is roughly $17 a month.

In addition, they both live in Lagos, a bustling city of over 22 million, whose notorious traffic snarl often requires office workers and students to set out as early as 6 am in order to arrive at work by 8 am. This means many are unable to grab breakfast, and if they have no money, they then face the reality of starving throughout the day at work. If Mummy Zee could afford a fridge, analysts have argued, there would be no need whatsoever for the self-deprecating decision to wake up at 4:50 am to cook. It was this nuance that the feminists missed when they came down hard at Mummy Zee.

Misinterpretations of feminism

According to Adokwu, a crucial problem spotlighted by the controversy is how 'feminism has suffered from misrepresentation by individuals, particularly some self-serving women who falsely claim to be feminists and have distorted and trivialised the genuine struggles of true feminists, thereby creating a caricature of the feminist movement.'

For her, feminism is a socio-political ideology and movement that seeks to address and dismantle systemic inequalities and discrimination based on gender. At its core, feminism operates on the premise that societal structures and norms are often biased towards favouring men over women, resulting in the marginalisation and oppression of women in various aspects of life. In this context, feminism addresses the evolution of gender roles ascribed to the sexes, in society, and the once again ascribed superiority of one sex – the male – over the other – the female.

Yet, while it calls for concern how misrepresentation has significantly hindered the progress toward achieving feminist goals in Africa, the growth of feminist consciousness since colonial times has been undoubtedly remarkable. After a period of effervescence at the dawn of independence, feminism declined in Nigeria, becoming an insulting byword, but nowadays many young women, more than would have been the case a generation or two ago, identify as feminists.

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'There's no one single feminism, and there are many currents within feminism', Jaye Gaskia, a political analyst, noted. According to him, there are three major currents that have arisen in the context of historical waves of massive and intensive mass organising and mobilising around the conditions of women, coinciding respectively with 'the struggle for political representation and the vote – liberal feminism of the first wave; the struggle for socioeconomic justice, for the right of women to work, and for equal pay for equal work – socialist/Marxist feminism of the second wave; and the current wave of feminism, which sees the primary division in society as between men and women – radical feminism'. He observed that although all the currents of feminism coexist globally, many feminists in Nigeria are influenced by the radical feminism of the third wave.

A distinct characteristic of this wave is its rejection of the structural root of women's oppression within society. For instance, despite the running contentions over cooking in relationships, the upper caste women in society can mitigate the burdens of such chores easily and at less expense by securing a retinue of workers or opting for dining out. But this is not the same for the poor and working-class women who are driven by poverty to confront the demands of daily life less assuredly and through a complex labyrinth of compromises and adjustments. This emphasises

why feminism locates the oppression of women primarily in the material conditions of society. Society creates and moulds the dynamics of gender relations, and it is what must undergo a radical transformation if these relations are ever going to be altered.

In a nutshell, there is neither grace nor shame in Mummy Zee's choices as they were dictated by her material poverty and not her own free will. Therefore, there can be no glory, as male chauvinists would have us believe, in a pregnant woman waking up by 4:50 am to cook, when other, less stressful choices exist. Neither is the harsh criticism of the opposing feminists a measured response, considering that Mummy Zee made the only obvious choice that her poor condition allowed. Meanwhile, millions of women like her are forced to make such choices daily, even though they are self-deprecating. But these women would make different choices in a different circumstances.

Today, Mummy Zee no longer needs to wake up pre-dawn to feed her man because she now has a fridge and microwave, which empowers her to sleep longer and choose her hours of rest. This newfound freedom, coupled with her latest status as an influencer and the ensuing financial gains, have further elevated her lifestyle, allowing for indulgences such as regular takeouts, fine dining experiences and vacations — which all women should be able to enjoy.



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