

Gender Issues: Feminist Approaches

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This version is the result of joint editing work by the author and Melania García, a B2 English student (upper intermediate EFL) and member of the DIF network (Desarrollando Inteligencia Feminista, EOI Fuengirola), who kindly volunteered her translation into Spanish so the text could be used by Coeducación EOI Fuengirola.

This text is about the need to develop a feminist intelligence in order to overcome the patriarchal identity model and thus respect human identities. It also explains why we have the cross-curricular subject Education for Equality in public education in Spain, Coeducación, and offers an exercise to explore the vital and complex issue of gender, which our culture and tradition does not allow us even to explore.
8 pages. US American English

The **cross-curricular subject of Education for Equality** at EOI Fuengirola (called Desarrollando Inteligencia Feminista, DIF, which offers various kinds of online resources and materials) develops an **education right** the law grants to anyone learning in the Spanish Education System. This right relates to **helping us all identify** and overcome or transform unjust and violent beliefs, attitudes, words or behaviors we all have as a result of centuries of being socialized in patriarchal societies. By offering this chance to learn, we give ourselves the **opportunity to become juster**, kinder, more tolerant, wiser, more understanding human beings; less violent or destructive in the way we see ourselves and others, name and relate to others and ourselves.

About the **values and the social organization of patriarchal cultures**, modern social and natural sciences have done a great deal of research from a feminist understanding – for instance in Gender Studies at universities worldwide, in Sociolinguistics, Sociology, Anthropology, Neuroscience (recommended for all: **Cordelia Fine's** *Delusions of Gender. How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* at <http://www.cordeliafine.com/general-information1.html>)... However, this **body of study and criticism to patriarchal culture** not only comes from universities today. Good **ideas like** that of **human rights**, which have started to change the world massively today, have **also come from people** who in their everyday lives have fought against violence in different ways (violent ideas, attitudes, words, not only physical violence). And among these people there have always been **women**. We don't know them because women have been banned from human activities they were well prepared to engage in anyway. Women who have not complied with the role or the identity model for Woman as defined by patriarchal culture, like feminists today, have been considered a threat to society and have had to pay a cruel price for pursuing what today is called "respect for human rights".

Therefore, we need to understand this: when we contemplate a cave painting, when we celebrate Human Rights, **we need to understand** that a great number of people who created and produced that knowledge are **anonymous** – and that many of those, as **Virginia Woolf** suggested, are women ("I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman," in *A Room of One's Own*, ch. 3., often misquoted as "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman"). If we wish to rescue our gaze and intelligence, we need to overcome our prejudice towards women thinkers, artists, and activists. We need to be aware of their

existence, acknowledge it, accept it, and identify their influence in the kind of human progress and evolution that leads us towards nonviolent societies.

Women are people. This means they are capable of everything that's human, including rational thought or physical violence. In patriarchy, women have been socialized for centuries as humans who can't be rational and who are banned from using physical violence (e.g. consider what male scientists have said about women's intelligence in **Jacky Fleming's** comic book, *The Trouble with Women*, <https://www.jackyfleming.co.uk/new-book/>), and because for centuries they have been considered less than Man – been subject to that extreme ideological violence – women are **experts in identifying violence and pursuing nonviolent struggle** – not only for their survival, also for human progress to rational empathetic nonviolent societies.

Considering our human nature, beyond the identity rules of the patriarchal sex-gender system, it's easy to understand we've always known it was wrong to mistreat, oppress, repress and abuse people, to make people suffer. The difference today is that **society at large is starting to see the violence and reject it**. To illustrate, thanks to the feminist idea "The personal is political" (1960s), today more people understand that if a man beats his wife, this is NO private issue but a social problem that cannot be allowed and should be denounced. Another example is more people understand the awkwardness, the fear, even the terror that comes from having your body publicly evaluated by men you don't have a loving or sexual relationship with).

As we control or overcome our fears to those who are most violent, we humanize ourselves and become freer, wiser and more empathetic. We start to understand the numerous kinds of violence patriarchal cultures promote. Far too often, this is seen in the values underlying how we construct who we are: always by putting down other kinds of human identities (e.g. "being a boy is better than being a girl," "being a heterosexual is *normal*," "having money means you're a better person," "belonging to an industrial kind of culture makes you superior to those cultures closer to nature"... These violent ideas we find in society).

Those in power have not granted us human rights. There is a long *Humanstory* (coined here because I needed this word) of nonviolent struggle for kinder and more intelligent ideas for our society. In spite of so many people having been silenced, their contribution has had great impact on our society. We know because otherwise patriarchal cultures would have destroyed themselves long ago, as a result of their very violent values and ways. We also know because of who we are – we're more diverse than what tradition and culture allow. What we have saved from self-destruction is our humanity, our human identity beyond the patriarchal gender model – that kind of Man and Woman who are meant to be "complementary," denying, in this way, human characteristics to the other (e.g., Man = rational, Woman = irrational), which is a brutal idea.

Therefore, our **Humanstory** of striving for rescuing our humanity has been long, and has prevented us from becoming extinct. And that's been possible because there have always been people who wanted to exist and coexist with others, respecting the diversity of human identities, reducing the use of violence to a true minimum.

Women have always had human minds, and therefore, in spite of repression and exploitation, have contributed key ideas, values, and actions to the world we have today. Patriarchy is androcentric and that means Man is necessarily the measure of all things human – not humans, people, just men. **Patriarchal society is hard-wired to be prejudiced against human reality.**

Everything connected to women not performing the role or accepting the identity model makes us feel wary, suspicious, threatened, and consequently we tend to avoid, ignore or hurt them. We don't want to listen to or read women doing or saying things that culture has not allowed them to do or say. And most often we tend to try to hurt these women by rejecting and defaming them. Just consider what we hear about female "feminists."

Likewise, **men** have not only been Man, in spite of belonging to a kind of society that acknowledged them as more intelligent, courageous and noble than women. There have been men who refused to exert the fundamental patriarchal right to believe they were better, more intelligent, rational, courageous and noble than women. Throughout the silenced Humanstory in History, there have always been men who understood that women (and they themselves!) were people, with *human* (not gendered) gifts and abilities. They have understood that just because they were men that did not mean they had to comply with the mandate of using gender violence, this is, violence against women (which starts with speaking as they do about women when women are not around), to mold them and make them obey, or use their bodies as containers for their pleasure or procreation. They understood because they were human

Human intelligence can be much wiser and positive for problem-solving. Our imagination and creativity and empathy can generate a very different kind of human society. In order to be and to have, we don't need to create a violent unfair world. There have always been people who understood this.

We are making progress, but we're not safe from the brutal ideology we've sustained for centuries. Today we can shout out "STOP RAPING!" but we continue to justify rape and be raped in many ways we are unaware of, first and foremost by not believing that the crude reality of rape is real, in spite of overwhelming evidence. Our **law against gender violence** (<https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2004-21760>), for instance – a vital step forward – although acknowledging the social problem we have of men using violence against women, limits this notion to espouses and ex espouses and it leaves out rape as it occurs in our world. The following notions are not clearly understood: the difference between human violence (that which all of us are capable of), domestic violence (any kind of violence in the home, not only gender violence), and gender violence (Man's violence against women in patriarchal societies).

Our **Penal Code** (see "*leyes orgánicas 11/1999 y 15/2003 de reforma del Código Penal*"), although including the notion of rape, does not describe the rape problem as we experience it in the patriarchal world, understanding its severity. At court, as illustrated by the case of *La Manada*, rapists are sentenced for "sexual abuse," legally considered less severe than rape. It is perverse we still have to hear that rapists link sexual intercourse to torture. Plus we come from a tradition that imposes the idea "all women are sluts," whether they want to have a sexual life or not (individual or shared), because in patriarchal societies women are banned from seeking pleasure if that means not accepting a role of being a doll. Even before going to court, many people have already judged and condemned the victim of rape if she's a woman.

We can shout out "EQUAL SALARIES!," but oftentimes we suspect the problem is that women are not properly qualified and that what they do is less valuable than that being done by a man. You even hear women saying "I don't want to be treated differently" as if women who got the job because there was a **positive discrimination** policy had been granted it with inferior or no qualification. Consider the massive amount of prejudiced (and ignorant) jokes on "positive

discrimination". There is **humor** designed to repress people, not to make them laugh or think. In Spain we have a saying, *Tirar piedras sobre tu propio tejado*, "To stone your own roof".

Anything that is new or critical with Power is perceived as a threat. That's a **destructive irrational attitude** that sustains the frame of mind that allows us to defend traditions that threaten our lives and living.

Respect for traditions cannot possibly involve the silencing of **reasoning and dialogue**. We need to respect what our evolution has allowed us to see as necessary **social change**. As an example of this sort of **conceptual violence**, the Language Academy in Spain, *RAE*, a prescriptivist body, gave birth to a monstrous prescripto-descriptivist hybrid in November 2018. Desperately, these authoritarian men insist that women should not be named – to preserve the Old World were women have no say. Language change reflects social change, and we are moving beyond this authoritarian androcentric view of humans.

We need to be able to learn. Critical thinking and communication are vital for our education and evolution, to rescue our humanity and move away from what is today felt by many as a kind of primitive and violent type of human society. We're certainly making progress but still today, if people hear Someone is a Feminist, they know what She is all about, even if they've never heard or read feminist analysis – which indicates extreme cultural rejection, a prejudiced attitude, a biased opinion.

Consider the issue of **revolutions** in History. The mainstream idea of "revolution" is very violent and distorting because History has just told us about violence. But the word has other meanings for many of us: '**deep transformation**' to put an end to all kinds of violence. When we consider History, we are unable to even imagine there were women fighting for rights for all, for a different kind of world, using **nonviolence** most of the times.

But still, **most pacifists don't include feminist nonviolent struggle in their perception or work.** The model is still Gandhi, perhaps Martin Luther King or even César Chávez. Women undertaking Direct Nonviolent Action (DNVA) are not even perceived. It's clear that being a pacifist, or even a feminist, does not mean one has overcome the patriarchal ideological conditioning. To understand this, a useful analogy is non-believers in Christian, Muslim, or Jewish societies. Culturally speaking, a non-believer from one of those societies inherits part of a certain cultural frame of mind, in spite of the fact that their human mind allows her or him to see things different to their mainstream culture.

I suspect that is why **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie** says "We Should All Be Feminists". More info in Spanish, <https://coeducacioninteligenciafeminista.wordpress.com/2018/11/14/por-que-todxs-deberiamos-ser-feministas/>, where you'll also find a post on the fact that feminist translators are not hired to translate feminists, which results in a distorted view of what the author says, something that can be seen in the title of the essay in the Spanish translation, which is not "Todas las personas..." or "Todas y todos..." but an androcentric masculine "Todos..." For more check out Ngozi's website, <https://www.chimamanda.com/book/we-should-all-be-feminists/>.

Feminism, like other social movements protecting people and life on the planet, has been transforming our world through nonviolence. Although women are human beings, and as such,

are capable of using physical violence, since culture has denied them that option, they're experienced in two very different questions: first, defending themselves from violence through nonviolence mostly, and second exerting other kinds of violence (that Man also exerts), particularly verbal, conceptual and attitudinal violence.

We cannot perceive all of this unless we overcome the cultural conditioning by developing feminist understanding of our culture and lives. We must trust our intelligence to do so. We're much more intelligent than we actually think! It's good news. We can see *what is there* if we choose to open our minds, and learn to think NOT along the lines of Patriarchal Reason (*la razón patriarcal*), but along the more humane and constructive lines of **Empathetic Rationality** (*racionalidad empática*), **observing the world and ourselves with a clear gaze**. We need to see better, more accurately, more realistically, because by default we are prejudiced against anything that is different to what tradition establishes as "normal", mainstream.

Since after the issuing of the **Declaration of Human Rights** (December 10, 1948), policies by international ruling bodies, political parties, governments, and trade unions have experienced the pressure by individuals and social movements, and defended some of those concerns in order to transfer them to laws and other kinds of documents organizing our coexistence. This is why, for instance, in state-run/public language education in Spain, *Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas*, we have the cross-curricular subject of **Education for Equality**.

Feminist struggle is also the reason why today, as compared to the 1970s in Spain, women have some rights – even though, as we all can observe in our everyday lives, **having rights does not automagically change a century-long culture**. Actually, and although non-feminists have probably never even imagined this, if in 1948 many human societies got to this point of understanding: that regardless your economic status, or power position, regardless the color/colour of your skin, your sexual organs, your sexuality, your beliefs, regardless the kind of mind or intelligence you had, the looks of your body, your abilities, your strengths, achievements or flaws, we all have rights, all of us have to be respected as humans, **this idea did not come without centuries of nonviolent struggle by numerous people** so as to humanize our very violent societies.

Among those people who were forced to fight for a better life and world, and in spite of being banned from everywhere, excluded and locked up most of the times, we've always had women who refused to be what culture told them they were, because they were *more* than that, or differently, even while identifying partly with that. They understood we were *human* and we might not fit into the straitjacket of the patriarchal sex-gender model. More examples of people whose existence cannot be found in patriarchal History where white men using domination prevailed include black people, Roma people, peoples from different parts of the world (the Original Peoples in America, the continent, *los pueblos originarios*), men who did not identify their masculinity with the patriarchal model for males – refusing to use physical violence, saying no to rape, torture, murder; people with diverse bodies or sexualities...

A great deal of people have been omitted from patriarchal history, but this doesn't mean they have not existed – and here, unfortunately much information is lost or nonexistent, so we also need to use our imagination, our scientific imagination, our emotional intelligence. Just watch the historian **Mary Beard** in her documentary on Romans in Ancient Times. You will realize that learning, studying, imagining and knowing is something that makes our lives merrier!

Traditional identity roles have hurt us and limited us and conditioned us to develop more violent answers to problems than nonviolent answers to problems. By “**violence**” we mean conceptual violence (e.g. ideas of what a “normal person” is, which we create to marginalize, ostracize, repress, exclude, stigmatize other people), violence in attitudes (e.g. not listening to feminist thinkers and activists, turning our backs to them because we choose to allow our prejudice and biased view prevail), verbal violence and silence, (we all know how much we can hurt people through the use of silence and language), not only physical violence – this is, we’re also referring to the kinds of violence everyone of us tends to use every day in some way.

Consequently, IN CLASS, as we actually tend to do because the setting encourages it, before expressing disagreement, for instance, we need to *listen* (avoid being judgmental and pay attention to what is being said), read, talk sincerely from non-aggressive thinking, so we can improve our ability to hold a dialogue, exchange views on any topic, share information and knowledge. For the fact is, **the very violent values in patriarchal cultures turn diversity into a battlefield** where people avoid considering who they are, what they are like, and instead build their identity by comparing themselves to others in a negative way, establishing they are better than other people. This, unfortunately, makes them deny human rights to others.

Feminism is an INTELLECTUAL TOOL that helps us grow out of a patriarchal frame of mind and the society this creates. In this cruel non-human world we've been told for centuries that Women are dangerous when they use their imagination, when they think and reason out the world, for they can't be rational as Man is, because they can only be emotional (as if emotion could be severed from thought), they get hysterical, and tend to make trivial immaterial comments. They're pretty and useful, but Man has to make decisions on her behalf, including if she should bear a child or interrupt a pregnancy. This is an **antihuman and anti-humane ideology**, and also misogynist. It's our responsibility to change this perception in our everyday lives. Let's work together for a better world.



Workshop

If you are interested in developing a feminist understanding of patriarchal societies and cultures, to reflect upon how we can build a juster and less violent personal and social identity – more along the lines of the idea of “human rights”, which is a learning right you have in Spain crosscurricularly – you will find this course very helpful.

EXERCISES for introspection...

- Write a minisaga imagining you had been born a different sex.
- Write a reasoned opinion. Sit and reflect upon the gender question first, brainstorming on what is a man / woman according to biology, then according to patriarchal culture, and finally what you are as a person, and/or as a man or a woman. No word limit – it's up to you. Then, decide whether you wish to show it to me, share in class or keep to yourself! If we share, the idea is not to convince each other of anything, but to learn about people's views on this, and make comments, give explanations, find questions whose analyses can make us wiser or at least more capable of living together in spite of our different ideas and ideals.

A. QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL WRITTEN ANSWERS

1. What makes you a man / woman? / Why are you a woman / man?
2. What makes you a human? / Why are you a human?

B. OPTIONAL.

Why do you think gender is such a sensitive issue?

From one to 10, being 1 “totally disagree” and 10 “totally agree”, how much do you agree with the traditional idea that our sexual organs and our role in reproduction (everybody's) condition our individual minds and potential in terms of what we can or cannot be, feel or do?