

# 'I believe that the rights of women and girls is the unfinished business of the 21st Century.' (Hillary Clinton) Do you concur?

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## **Equal rights for all women and girls today is impossible.**

A seemingly pessimistic response I know, but one that reached full clarity for me when reflecting on a book by African Studies scholar Frederick Cooper. A warning to those seeking out an interdisciplinary degree; your life will become an endless stream of similarities and comparisons that work their way into even the most everyday of conversations!

In *Africa since 1940*, Cooper describes the two decades leading up to the wave of African independences in the 1960s. Amongst many other debates, his work complicated previous studies about the "inevitability" of decolonisation in Africa. He showed that it actually wasn't until the 1950s, after almost 40 years of colonialism, that countries turned towards nationalism. In other words, most African states were not demanding independence, they called instead for *rights* for their citizens, equal to those of other countries in their colony.

I use this example specifically, to highlight that rights can only ever be as

equal as the context allows. It is not my aim to compare the subjugation of colonialism to experiences of women today. Likewise, I won't spend time trying to unpick the limits of the term "women", or "girls", when accounting for contemporary issues surrounding race, class, sexuality and gender fluidity. I regard myself as a feminist for example, but as a black woman I would struggle to consider any discussion about the 21st Century that did not also speak of the disparities felt by ethnic minorities.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes this kind of debate as an "oppression olympics" and it's not worth pursuing here.

It's not about who deserves the most attention. The unfinished "business" is that of the kind of equality we are trying to achieve. What is the nature of the society we are striving for? Current politicians, particularly in the US, seem preoccupied with people's right to an equal piece of the proverbial pie, to their own version of what some might call the "American Dream".

Colonial society's very existence and longevity in Africa relied upon the majority of citizens having

fewer rights. Similarly, the capitalist model of the American Dream is inherently sexist, as well as racist, and is built on the existence of marginalised groups who aren't able to achieve it. How can you be successful, happy and rich, without having someone who isn't, to compare yourself to? Providing equal rights within a colony was a paradoxical concept. Rights for all women and girls in today's society are equally unattainable.

Politicians, and campaigners alike, must therefore take a pointed look at the rights of the more fortunate instead. What structures support their privilege? What is it about our societal model that allows them to dominate, while others, as Clinton went on to say, are "oppressed and violated and demeaned and degraded and denied"? Most importantly then, how can the society in question be remodelled to offset this disparity?

More rights for the oppressed yes, but first, fewer for the unfairly privileged.

*MA African Studies*

(Word Count: 500)