

Stop praising women's strength. We need a world where we don't have to fight to be valued.
By Schaeffer Okore, *The Guardian*, May 3rd, 2023

I've lost count of the number of times I've seen or heard women lauded for their strength whenever they are recognised for anything outstanding. Critics argue that there's nothing wrong with this – after all, it is evidence of women's hard work. However, there is no evidence, historical or otherwise, that shows women not working hard.

5 History is a litany of hardworking, strong, audacious women whose impact was limited because their strength could only get them so far. Women aren't working hard, being strong or audacious in a vacuum. Women continue to be strong in a world where they consistently have fewer resources, less power and less influence than men.

10 Additionally, the spotlight tends to shine on the few already uplifted women, with multiple societal privileges, such as belonging to dominant races, socioeconomic classes, religions and citizenships of global north countries. On the rare occasions it illuminates women without racial privilege, power or class, it demands even greater strength to have overcome these extra barriers.

15 But no amount of "strength" can overcome gender pay gaps, limited career growth opportunities, the motherhood penalty, extremely inadequate ways to deal with gendered harassment and violence in the workplace, at home or even using legal means, and more. Praising women's strength, without analysing why women's strength is a burden, is to wilfully ignore the direct links between the structural barriers that entrench gender marginalisation and the thwarting of women's full potential.

20 Marginalisation by gender is an intentional tactic used against multiple gender minorities, to ensure the success and power of select groups over others. For instance, something as simple as walking alone, specifically at night, continues to pose huge life risks for women everywhere. This tells us that even the fullness of a 24-hour day is something women are structurally denied. Mechanisms that ensure women's physical safety and security are still
25 viewed as negotiable, despite an abundance of statistics showing an urgent need for them.

"Strength" has not protected the millions of victims of femicide and maternal mortality, or survivors of gendered online violence. It hasn't protected the women and girls of Syria, Afghanistan and Iran, and many others, who have backbones of steel yet continue to face insurmountable levels of gendered structural violence.

30 To change these harmful systems, we must continue radically shifting norms, despite continuing resistance. Second, creating accountable and equitable governance structures is not just women's work; it is everyone's task, with those in possession of political and other decision-making power, resources and influence needing to do much more heavy lifting.

35 Finally, the romanticisation of women's survival within structures purposely deployed to keep them fighting losing battles must be abolished. Society must begin prioritising women and all gendermarginalised people as worthy of better social protection, better pay, better opportunities, better options, safer societies or systems, and better lives.

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