

The Value of Women

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'Behind every great man there's a great woman'. This phrase, attributed to Meryl Frost, was first cited in print in The Port Arthur News in February 1946 (Martin n.d.), and would soon become the poster child of woman empowerment. Behind every amazing, successful man there's a great woman. At first glance this statement says, 'women are the spine of our society, without women we cannot be successful'. However, when we dissect the words, '*behind every great man is a great woman*', we start to realise that a woman needs to be the supporting actress in the life of a man in order to even be recognised. For a very long time in society women have played supporting roles for men. In all honesty, women are defined by men. Who they are as women in a specific era is defined by what a man needs at that specific time. This not only speaks to how they dress or their physical stature, but also to how they carry themselves in society; the characteristics they display in our social world; where they think they belong; how they interact with other women and how deserving and worthy of love they are according to themselves. Society says your value as a woman lies in how desirable you are to a man.

On the subject of desirability, women have been subjected to nearly impossible standards of beauty. In the age of social media, how presentable you look has become a matter of importance. However, how women present themselves is not a twenty-first century concept. The concept can be dated back as early as 500–300 B.C.E (before common era) (Chalker 2020). The concept shape-shifts so often but these standards are placed on women more often than men. A woman must alter her natural body to fit standards that afford her better treatment than the woman who does not meet these standards. A good example of this is the relationship women are forced to have with their body hair. Body hair on a woman is seen as unhygienic and disgusting (Chhatlani 2019), whereas with men it does not seem to be much of a bother. It is not only men who are bothered by women having excessive body hair. Women police other women's bodies as well, describing women

who keep their body hair as self-loathing. Scientifically this can be argued when cyclists are discouraged to shave before a big cycling event. Their body hair aids in keeping harmful bacteria from entering the body through cuts. The same argument holds for the hair on a woman's body, it serves a purpose – as with everything the human body naturally possesses. Now, this argument seems light, but as a society we *must* be aware that women are expected to mould their bodies just to be aesthetically pleasing – even if it means sacrificing their health.

Regarding mental, physical, and sexual health, it seems almost luxurious to claim you have all three as a woman. With gender-based violence (GBV) rising during a pandemic, it's clear to see that women may not be the least protected, but more so the most attacked. According to Amnesty International, 2 300 GBV-related calls were made to the South African Police Service (SAPS) within the first week of lockdown (Amnesty International 2021). To put it in perspective, that is more or less 328 phone calls per day for a full week. The issue of gender-based violence does not only put women in physical danger, but it compromises their mental and sexual health. Women are close to twice as likely to have Generalised Anxiety Disorder or GAD (severe, ongoing anxiety that may interfere with daily activities) when compared to men (Texas Health Resources 2021). This is not surprising due to the fact that women are forced to navigate the world in a way where they need to be more vigilant than men. In essence, they end up having to make themselves small to make space for men. This is very evident in sexual assault cases where there is a lot of victim-blaming, as evidenced by a Canadian case where a 19 year old rape victim was told, by a judge, that had she kept her knees together she wouldn't have been penetrated (Pitzen n.d.). This assertion is further affirmed by the need to continuously put sexual assault victims in positions where they must relive their traumas. For many women, despite being fed the notion that a man is 'your protector', the protector becomes the very thing they end up fearing.

Many women have been in a position where their body did not belong to them. The body which they are born in, is not to be ruled by them. From how it moves and looks to who has permission to access it. The female body, in turn, becomes an object that can be built and deconstructed by everyone except the woman who owns it. This does not, as aforementioned, only come from men but also the very women who raise these men and get to experience them. There is an unspoken comparison that happens amongst women where it seems they cannot exist in one space with their differences. There is an inconspicuous hierarchy which regulates who is and is not worthy of being graced with the title of 'woman'. It also regulates who gets to enjoy privilege of having their rights defended. The dangers of this hierarchy limits women to their sexual orientation, their sexual organs, how they present themselves in society, and how well they cater to the needs of those around them.

By gatekeeping who gets to experience womanhood, women devalue themselves. Having a 'one size fits all' idea of what a woman is supposed to be deprives society of the beauty of womanhood. There is so much division amongst woman that it seems that women who possess more masculine traits may be unable to have conversations with hyper-feminine women. Hyper-femininity in the media gets depicted in a negative light, depicting beautiful woman as either extremely mean or unintelligent. Movies such as *Mean girls* and *Legally Blonde* are perfect examples of this trope. Characters who are written as intelligent are usually displayed as not being typically feminine or the most attractive and noticeable. You hardly hear any of the female investigators on the series *Bones* mentioning that they have an appointment at the nail salon.

Having women being written into two polar categories is a result of men writing (about) woman in a way that satisfies their fantasies of the type of women they'd be able to handle or access. This portrayal of women leaves no room for fluidity. It also leaves no room for the simultaneous existence of polar opposite truths. When viewing woman as people who fit into particular boxes, we limit what they are allowed to offer society. We do not make space for them to add more value to society than they currently do. For women, their value is overlooked because they do what they are expected to do. Our male counterparts will be acknowledged and congratulated for the roles they are supposed to play, only because it is not expected of them. We never recognise the value of women when they fulfil the roles that, as a society, we expect them to fulfil. As in all instances, we will only know the true value of women when we no longer have access to their grace. In their absence, that is when, as a society, we will recognise the true value of a woman.

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