

◆ Opinion Ilse Ghekiere a.o.

# The myth of the strong woman who doesn't complain is suppressive and deadly at the same time



Wednesday in Warsaw there have been manifestations again against the strict Polish abortion law. "How is the body of women not a war zone?" Image AFP Image AFP

**Karolien Chromiak, artist, Engagement Arts; Martha Claeys, PhD student of philosophy, University of Antwerp; Ilse Ghekiere, Artist, Engagement Arts; Anneleen Lemmens, artist, Engagement Arts; Katrien Schaubroeck, philosophy teacher, University of Antwerp; Lotte Spreeuwenberg, PhD student of philosophy, University of Antwerp; Petra Van Brabandt, philosophy teacher, Sint Lucas Antwerp**

January 28, 2021, 11:00 AM

The victim role, some women have had enough of that term. According to Delphine Lecompte (DM 15/1 and DM 23/1), women are not holy softies and are not inferior to men in violence, rancor and perversion. They are strong enough to defend themselves in the dark caverns of eroticism without mutual consent. Transgenderism, she says, has also "resolved the conflict between men and women"; we have entered the post-gender reality of complex individuals. Sophie Lodewijks (DM 20/1) said in response to the essay "From Big Brother to Kaat Bollen: when will judgments about women's bodies stop?" that feminism has long achieved its goals. The endless complaining about oppression puts us in a victim role over and over again and makes us weak, "our lives are not limited by others, we do that all by ourselves." She calls for positive thinking and "the recognition of the strong woman."

Lecompte and Lodewijks take a radically individualistic position here. They reduce the political to individual psychology and ignore social reality by focusing on individual experiences. You could say that they reduce the political to the personal, while feminism states that the personal is political. A feminist commitment requires that we compare our individual experiences with social reality. When you do this, you cannot help but conclude that injustice still affects women disproportionately.

Women in Belgium still earn less for the same job. Almost one in five girls in Belgium is the victim of forced sexual contacts or relationships before her 18th birthday. One in three women will experience physical or sexual violence in her life. One in seven Belgian women has experienced at least one act of violence by a partner or ex-partner in the past 12 months. 85 percent of all women have already been harassed on the street. Moreover, female victims of violence only file a complaint in 13.9 percent of the cases. When looking for investors for start-ups, the exact same pitch gets a better rating if it is brought by a man. Women receive different - less relevant -

questions than men when applying for a job. In advertising predominantly women's bodies are objectified. Poverty is female and one in ten women in Flanders has no money to buy tampons. Because they are less involved in drug testing, some medication does not work or even harms women. In October, Poland's already strict abortion law was further tightened despite mass protests and women's strikes. Young adult girls who choose to wear the hijab are not welcome in some schools. So how exactly is the body of women not a war zone?

Women are victims. We realize that this "negative balance" is painful to read, but stating that women have won what there was to win and thus ignoring the facts, does not make these situations disappear. When Lecompte optimistically states that transgenderism has resolved the conflict between men and women, she ignores, for example, the discrimination and disproportionate violence against trans and non-binary people. Anyone who does not conform to gender expectations, role models and stereotypes still pays a price for this. Discrimination on the rental and labor market, physical and verbal abuse, increased risk of PTSD. The binary gender system still regulates reproductive labor and power relations, and women draw the short straw.

The myth of the strong woman who doesn't complain is suppressive and deadly at the same time. It causes that women who are victims of sexism, transgressive behavior and violence still think it is weak to report a crime or to file a complaint. Because: man up, don't complain. We see similar mechanisms in other forms of discrimination. People who denounce racism are also dismissed as weak: "you are hypersensitive, come on, be positive!" Being "strong" is a problematic ideal that ignores the fact that you cannot rise when injustice keeps putting you down. But the self-pity that women would wallow in is also a myth. Daring to see and acknowledge that you are being wronged takes a lot of courage. And how powerful is it to denounce

something against the majority? Repeating the same thing over and over, filing a complaint, possibly going through a lawsuit, just because you don't want it to happen to others after you. Accusing wrongdoing is not a tale of pitiful people wallowing in a corner. It is hard work and rewards us with insights. It is what we call activism and it makes us resilient.

Like any social struggle, the feminist has three characteristics: describing and examining oppression (so that injustice becomes insightful and recognizable); accuse them incessantly and loudly (so that it gains visibility and gets on the political agenda) and finally working for change, in all areas of our society. These aspects are inextricably linked. Framing women who denounce abuses as women who wrap themselves in “that old, familiar blanket of self-pity”, as Sophie Lodewijks writes, has no place in this.

Feminism requires that we look beyond the individual position. The battle is only over when there is equality for all women. Also for trans women, fat women, black women, poor women, sick women, housewives, Muslim women, sex workers, lesbian women, women with disabilities, single mothers ... For the women who cannot break through the glass ceiling. And for the women who clean up the pieces of those who go through it ruthlessly. For all women whose bodies remind them daily that injustice is real.