FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: New Book Explores Myths and Realities of Black Women’s “Strength”

Contact Information:
Chanequa Walker-Barnes
info@drchanequa.com
678-547-6442

Too Heavy A Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength

Black women are strong. At least that’s what everyone says and how they are constantly depicted. But rarely does anyone question what “strong” means or the price that Black women pay for such strength. In Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes – a theologian and clinical psychologist – offers the most comprehensive examination of the ideology of the StrongBlackWoman and the first book to extensively explore the role of the Christian church in its evolution and maintenance. She discusses the ideology’s three core features and its impact upon the health of Black women in the United States. She traces the historical roots of the ideology and the contemporary forces that maintain it, including R&B and hip-hop music, and popular television and film. Issuing a clarion call for the Christian church, she calls upon pastoral caregivers to aid in the healing of Black women’s identities and offers a twelve-step program for StrongBlackWomen in recovery. A well-researched and practical guide, Too Heavy a Yoke is a must-read for Black women who struggle with the myth of strength and for pastoral counselors who minister to them.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia. She is a licensed psychologist and a candidate for ordination in the United Methodist Church. Her articles have been published in a wide range of scholarly journals, including Journal of Pastoral Theology, Child Development, and American Journal of Community Psychology.

Too Heavy a Yoke
by Chanequa Walker-Barnes
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I. How did your research begin?

This book began as a personal odyssey. After struggling with some health issues that were stress-related, I realized that much of my stress came from trying to be “all things to all people,” in other words, trying to live up to the image of the StrongBlackWoman. After integrating some of the changes that I suggest in this book into my own life, I realized that there were a lot of other women like me, especially in the church. Their pain glared at me day after day – in the church, in the community, and in the health statistics that I kept reading about Black women. But no one seemed to be talking about it. I wanted to write a book that would raise awareness about the impact that the StrongBlackWoman is having upon the health and well-being of Black women in the United States.

2. Why is it so hard for Black women to take the "I'm Every Woman" track out of their life's playlist?

Black girls and women start to be socialized into the ideology of the StrongBlackWoman at a very young age, by our family, our churches, and even society at large. At home, we are taught to care for others, to repress our pain, and to go it alone. At church, we are taught that God wants it that way. And popular culture reinforces the message with a snazzy beat and an entertaining storyline. The examples are all around us, from the music of Destiny’s Child to the television and film characters of Tyler Perry and Shonda Rhimes. It’s hard to resist indoctrination when it comes from every angle.

3. Why do you spell “StrongBlackWoman” with no spaces between the words?

There is a difference between being a StrongBlackWoman and being a Black woman who is strong. A StrongBlackWoman is a very specific way of being in the world, with three core features – emotional strength/regulation, caregiving, and independence. These sound good, but in the StrongBlackWoman they are woven together in a way that leads to significant problems in health and well-being.

4. Black women are so instrumental in the life of the church, so why is it that there has been little attention to the pastoral care they receive?

Issues impacting women tend to be relegated to the sidelines by our predominantly male church leadership, despite the fact that women are the largest contributors to the church in terms of finances, membership, and labor. Getting male clergy to educate themselves about women’s pastoral care needs is a challenge. Seminary courses on ministering to women usually have very few men registered, as if they don’t expect women to be part of their congregations. That’s why we need more women as pastors and church leaders.
5. Do pastors and church leaders often neglect Black women because people often think, "they can handle it"?

Absolutely. One of the stories that I tell in the book is that of a pastor who told me “Sisters always have it together.” He was talking about why he had decided to emphasize men’s issues and male leadership development in his church. There’s even an article where someone claims that Black women are the “new model minority.” But these kinds of statements usually focus on issues such as incarceration, education, and employment. Those are important indicators, but they ignore a key factor: health disparities.

6. Speaking of incarceration, there has been a great deal of discussion lately about the Prison Industrial Complex. Does your book discuss how the PIC factors into the struggles of Black women?

Certainly the issues with unjust sentencing laws impact the lives of Black women, and I discuss that a little. But if we focus on those exclusively, we end up with a lot of initiatives focused solely on Black men and boys, such as President Obama’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. And we overlook the main battlefront where the cultural war against Black women exerts its greatest impact: physical and mental health disparities. I devote an entire chapter in the book to describing the health crisis among Black women and its relationship to the ideology of the StrongBlackWoman.

7. Who do you hope will read this book? Is it mainly for academic types or could women in a book club read and understand it?

Both. My aim with Too Heavy a Yoke was to write a book that has immediate practical use for women who struggle under the yoke of the StrongBlackWoman and for the clergy and counselors who minister to them. The book is written primarily with them in mind. But the book is also academically rigorous. So I draw a lot from my personal and professional experience but I support it with research from theology, the social sciences, and cultural studies. The lay audience will focus on the main body of the text, whereas academics will also be interested in the footnotes. Each chapter ends with thoughts and questions for reflection and action. And there will be a discussion guide for book clubs.
Just say “StrongBlackWoman” and nearly anyone who has significant relationships with Black women has some idea of what you are talking about. Black women are expected to be strong. And conversations about them—as individuals or as a collective—routinely invoke the notion of their strength. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear stories like this:

No one knows how Ms. Martha does it. She lost her husband and only child in the same year. The day after her husband’s funeral, she came to church. We weren’t expecting to see her in worship that day. But there she was, singing in the choir and praising God! Then, that same year, her son was in a car accident that left him comatose. When she went to see him, just before leaving his side, she kissed him on the forehead and said, “If you’re not here when I get back, I’ll see you on the other side.” He passed away a few hours later. But Ms. Martha never missed a beat. She shows up every Sunday with a smile on her face. No one has ever seen her cry. She didn’t even cry at either of their funerals. What an incredibly strong woman of faith!

Ms. Martha could have easily been a stand-in for any number of the African American women whom I had treated in therapy over the years. Each of these women was under significant stress related to a common cause—their roles as caregivers. Regardless of their age or station in life, each had a high sense of responsibility and consequently served as a load bearer. That is, they were the individuals who could be relied upon most when something went wrong in their extended families, on their jobs, and in their churches and communities. They were the women who took care of ailing family members and who were generally the first called whenever someone had a problem. At work and at church, they could be counted upon to take up the slack when someone else failed to live up to their responsibilities. They tried to be helpful to everyone who asked and even to those who did not. They rarely said no to anyone. And they hardly ever asked for help, instead relying solely upon God to be their ultimate load bearer. These women were all faithful Christians, active churchgoers. Like Ms. Martha, each possessed a strong sense of faith that was often publicly heralded by those who knew them. Indeed, it was often out of their faith that they felt both compelled and empowered to serve others so endlessly. Whenever they felt the weight of responsibility bearing upon them, they ignored it, believing sincerely that God would continue to empower them to serve.

Ironically, the more that they did, the more people asked them to do. Over time, the burden of responsibility became too heavy to bear. But because they did not want to let anyone down (and because their pride would not allow themselves to be seen as persons in need of help), they kept giving, even as they felt their physical and/or emotional health giving way. They ignored the weight gain, hypertension, and migraines. They hid their chronic unhappiness and crying spells from their family and friends until finally, feeling on the verge of a breakdown, they decided to see a therapist. And in classic StrongBlackWoman style, they never told anyone that they were in therapy, not their spouses, parents, children, best friends, or pastors. Especially not their pastors.
“Too Heavy a Yoke is a much-needed, thoughtful, and nuanced examination of the ‘Strong Black Woman’ stereotype—a significant new contribution to multiple disciplines of pastoral care and counseling, psychology, sociology, African American and womanist-feminist studies, and constructive theology. Walker Barnes draws on both womanist and Trinitarian theologies to examine how the church can play a part in healing and liberating black women from ‘the burden of strength.’ Meticulously researched and beautifully written, this book belongs on the shelf of every minister and pastoral counselor, and indeed every woman who knows in her soul the burdens of being a ‘StrongBlackWoman.’”

—Pamela Cooper-White, Ben G. and Nancye Clapp Gautier Professor of Pastoral Theology, Care, and Counseling, Columbia Theological Seminary

“Well done! This book is a much-needed gift to the field of pastoral theology. It is a well nuanced and explicated research volume and a practical guide for caregivers, pastors, those who love women struggling with the ideology of the ‘StrongBlackWoman,’ as well as those in recovery.”

—Marsha Foster Boyd, President Emerita, Ecumenical Theological Seminary

“A prayerful, prophetic, poetic, pastoral, powerful womanist analysis of the StrongBlackWoman, from an interdisciplinary, experiential perspective names the context, content, complexities, and pathology of many Black women’s embodied archetypal, systemic oppression and posits hopeful options for a paradigmatic shift of recovery. Woven with artistry and passion, Too Heavy a Yoke is a must-read for clergy, therapists, caregivers, and any persons or groups committed to the liberation of black women, ultimately the liberation of all society.”

—Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Professor of Religion, Shaw University Divinity School