Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Schema Based on SES Among Black Women: A Qualitative Study Using the Agentic-Communal Model

Zharia Thomas[1] (iD) and Asia A. Eaton[1] (iD)

Abstract

The strong Black woman (SBW) schema is the stereotype that Black women in the United States are strong and resilient despite adversity. Black women have adopted this schema in response to structural oppressions, though the effects of endorsing the SBW for Black women's well-being are mixed. Importantly, the extent to which a Black woman is able to enact the SBW schema may depend on her socioeconomic status (SES). Using an intersectional approach and the agentic-communal model, higher SES Black women may find it easier to enact the SBW than lower SES Black women. The aim of this study was to understand how SES may limit or enhance Black women's perceptions and fulfillment of the SBW schema. Data were collected from 20 adult Black women participants using semi-structured interviews. Results were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes and differences in perceptions across levels of SES. Findings demonstrated that women across classes felt they had little choice but to enact strength, and both experienced high levels of burnout as a result of the SBW. Higher SES Black women felt enacting strength was easier as a result of having access to economic resources. However, they reported not having social resources to depend on like lower SES women—an emergent effect of holding both marginalized and privileged identities simultaneously. Findings are discussed in terms of how to better support the health and well-being of adult Black women across social classes in the United States.

Keywords

strong Black woman, schema, socioeconomic status, agency, communion

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema, a cultural gender role in the United States that portrays Black women as remaining resilient and dependable in the face of adversity (Abrams et al., 2019), has its historical roots with Black women's enslavement in the United States. Black women were forced to perform manual labor that defied traditional gender roles mandated to women (Collins, 2000; Harrington et al., 2010). Specifically, during the Antebellum period, Black women's physical strength and endurance was equated to their men counterparts, reinforcing perceptions that Black women are inherently strong (Harris-Lacewell, 2001). Previous literature demonstrates that the SBW schema has extensive implications for Black women, including the schema's positive association with poor health outcomes (Abrams et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2020) and its psychological (Davis, 2015) and social (Davis & Afifi, 2019) benefits – underscoring the relevance of the SBW schema to Black womanhood.

Despite these findings, there is a gap in the literature regarding the connection between socioeconomic status

(SES) and the SBW schema. Among the few research studies that do examine SES and the SBW schema among Black women, there are disparate findings (Erving, McKinnon, Thomas Tobin et al., 2024; Erving, McKinnon, Van Dyke et al., 2024; Platt & Fanning, 2023). We aimed to examine whether SES may influence Black women's subjective perceptions of their ability to fulfill the SBW schema. SES includes educational attainment and economic position (i.e., income) and can offer additional context regarding the conditions that affect Black women's beliefs about and fulfillment of the SBW schema (Manstead, 2018). To our knowledge, there are few extant studies that have examined

[1]Department of Psychology, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Zharia Thomas, Florida International University, 11200 SW 8th Street, Miami, FL 33199, USA.
Email: zthom016@fiu.edu

SES as a factor in Black women's subjective experiences with the SBW schema.

The stereotype of Black women's strength persists to the present day, as Black girls are socialized during adolescence to adopt and uphold behaviors related to the SBW schema such as independence, resilience, and strength (Oshin & Milan, 2019; Ramirez et al., 2017; Shambley-Ebron et al., 2016). For instance, a study using interviews to examine Black American mothers' expectations of their daughters found that mothers encouraged characteristics such as self-reliance and strength when engaging with their daughters (Ramirez et al., 2017). Related research found that Black mothers emphasized the importance of their daughters being self-reliant upon reaching adulthood (Oshin & Milan, 2019).

The SBW schema continues to be influential once Black girls reach adulthood. For example, Davis and Afifi (2019) examined communication styles among friendships between Black women, and reported that strength is reinforced through specific and unique communication styles within Black women's friendships, such as support following experiencing discrimination. Their research further revealed that, within their friendships, Black women fostered mutual strength and felt a deeper sense of kinship with their friends who similarly encouraged and upheld the value of strength (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Thus, Black women may perceive the SBW schema as beneficial for stronger kinships within their community. Many Black women also utilize the SBW schema to obtain psychosocial benefits, such as resilience and resistance against structural inequalities such as racism (Geyton et al., 2022; West, 2018). Specifically, Black women have reported using the SBW schema as a means for coping with the intersection of racism and sexism, known as gendered racism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Compared to the other schemas about Black women (e.g., the angry Black woman, the Jezebel; Jones et al., 2021), the SBW schema is perceived as a more superficially positive schema. For these reasons, the SBW schema, compared to the alternative gendered racial stereotypes, continues to be regarded as an overall positive aspect of gendered racial identity development of Black women (Davis & Afifi, 2019).

However, some of the effects linked to the SBW schema may be detrimental. Previous literature has reported negative outcomes associated with SBW endorsement, including decreased sleep quality, emotion suppression, and lack of help-seeking for both physical (e.g., intimate partner violence) and mental (e.g., depressive symptoms) ailments (Donovan & West, 2015; McLaurin-Jones et al., 2021; Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombé, 2021; Zounlome et al., 2019). These outcomes may be due to obligations of Black women to remain strong to avoid appearing vulnerable or weak (Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombé, 2021). Thus, the SBW schema has been framed as a paradox within previous literature, as Black women recognize the

simultaneous negative and positive outcomes associated with the schema (West et al., 2016).

In summary, there are over 25 years of research on Black women's perceptions of and experiences with the SBW schema, as well as research on how endorsing this schema affects Black women's well-being (Thomas et al., 2022). Often, however, this research has treated Black women as homogenous, resulting in Black women not being recognized as a group with complexity and variability, contributing to ongoing oppression (Volpe et al., 2022). As such, questions remain about how Black women experience the SBW schema across different social locations, including sexual identity, ability, and SES. In the present study, we focused specifically on how socioeconomic status may shape how Black women internalize, resist, or are affected by the SBW schema—an aspect that remains underexplored in existing research.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present study drew primarily on the intersectionality theoretical framework (Crenshaw, 1989) and the agentic-communal model (Rucker et al., 2018) to qualitatively investigate the perceived experience of the SBW schema among Black women in the United States who vary in SES. Intersectionality theory, developed by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), emerged in response to the limitations of traditional approaches to identity, which often treated social categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexual identity, as separate and disconnected. Intersectionality theory explains that the complex social position of an individual in a hierarchical structure impacts their interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions (Cho et al., 2013). Moreover, intersectionality asserts that overlapping identities (e.g., being Black, a woman, and higher SES) are inseparable and interact in complex ways, producing nuanced and emergent experiences that cannot be understood by simply adding and subtracting identity-based privileges and oppressions. For instance, focusing solely on race while neglecting gender identity yields an incomplete picture of individuals' subjective and objective realities (Velez & Spencer, 2018).

In the same way, we can also argue that Black women's class (or socioeconomic) status is inseparable from their race and gender identities and uniquely shapes their experiences and perspectives. This intersectional lens may provide insight into how Black women's perspectives of the SBW schema may differ based on SES. For instance, previous research proposed that, compared to higher SES Black women, lower SES Black women may be more likely to adhere to the SBW schema due to caregiving expectations (Jones et al., 2025). Thus, Black women's class status may intersect with their race and gender identity to influence their endorsement and perception of the SBW schema.

As a meta-theory, intersectionality guided our analysis of the complex interplay between Black women's experiences of oppression. However, because it offers limited direction on how specific identities manifest in people's lived experiences, we also drew on agentic-communal theory (Rucker et al., 2018) to better understand how Black women from different social classes may experience the SBW schema. The agentic-communal model (Rucker et al., 2018) explains that society is structured based on hierarchies and inequalities, such as unequal access to resources (i.e., wealth) or opportunities (i.e., education). Further, it asserts that these inequalities position an individual towards either agency (i.e., directs the attention of the individual towards the self, guiding them to focus on their self-interests) or communion (i.e., directs the attention of the individual towards the self in connection to others, guiding them to center connection). According to the model, individuals who are disadvantaged tend to orient toward communion, prioritizing relationships due to limited access to resources (or opportunities) and a perceived need for interdependence (Rucker et al., 2018). In contrast, individuals who are advantaged are positioned towards agency, focusing more on self-interest, as they perceive greater access to resources and the ability to achieve goals independently.

Agentic-communal theory notes that agency and communion are often linked to gender roles and are used to understand how individuals are expected to behave in different social contexts. Men are often encouraged or rewarded for agentic behavior, while women are socialized to display communal traits. However, this generalization is complicated by intersecting systems of privilege and oppression. In the present case, Black women, being subject to the SBW, are expected to be both agentic and communal (Thomas et al., 2022). For example, Black women with a lower SES may have fewer financial resources, making it more difficult to exercise self-reliance – a core attribute of the SBW schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). In this case, Black women would be positioned towards communion. In contrast, a Black woman with a higher SES may not experience this challenge and thus have an easier time fulfilling this attribute of the SBW schema. In this way, Black women may be relatively more positioned towards agency because of their economic and educational standing. Thus, we employed intersectionality theory and the agentic-communal model to guide our investigation of the influence of SES on Black women's perceptions of their ability to fulfill the SBW schema.

SBW Schema and SES

Previously, the SBW schema has been assigned varied definitions within the literature – all of which include the expectation of strength (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Within much of the literature, the SBW schema and the Superwoman schema are either used interchangeably or are seen as similar concepts (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). However, in the present study, we relied on Woods-Giscombé's (2010) conception of the SBW schema, which described the SBW as a Black woman who: (a) manifests strength, (b) represses emotions, (c) exhibits self-reliance and invulnerability, (d) achieves despite adversity, and (e) shows a willingness to care for others.

Divergent findings have been reported in recent quantitative literature examining the SBW schema and SES. Some studies have reported that there are significant differences in SBW endorsement based on SES among Black women. In one study, Black women with higher levels of education and greater net worth were less likely to endorse the Superwoman schema (Erving, McKinnon, Thomas Tobin et al., 2024). In a similar study, Black women with a college degree (i.e., bachelor's degree or higher) were less likely to endorse the Superwoman shema compared to Black women with less than a college degree (Erving, McKinnon, Van Dyke et al., 2024). Conversely, another study found no differences in SBW endorsement based on SES among Black women (Platt & Fanning, 2023). Finally, among middle and upper-middle class Black women, SBW endorsement also varied, with some participants endorsing the SBW and others rejecting it (Dow, 2015). These mixed findings highlight the need for further research to clarify the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping SBW endorsement.

Beyond the mixed findings on whether SES influences Black women's endorsement of the SBW schema, some studies suggest that SES may moderate the relation between SBW endorsement and well-being. In particular, Erving, McKinnon, Van Dyke et al. (2024) found the relation between SBW endorsement and depressive symptoms was strongest among Black women with high financial strain. However, the reasons why lower SES women may be more negatively impacted by the SBW schema remains unclear. It is possible that the SBW schema functions as a coping mechanism for Black women who experience different forms of oppression, including classism (Donovan & West, 2015). Considering the various poor health outcomes that are associated with SBW endorsement, utilizing the SBW schema for coping may enhance stress, or psychological distress specifically (West et al., 2016; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Thus, it is critical to investigate perceptions of the SBW schema as it can contribute to our understanding of Black women's experiences based on their race, gender, and class status.

Our qualitative study sought to explore how higher and lower SES Black women subjectively experience the SBW schema to better understand these paradoxical and moderated effects, and to enrich our understanding of whether, when, and how SES influences SBW endorsement (Davis & Jones, 2021; West et al., 2016). This qualitative approach also responds to ongoing efforts to encourage the

examination of within-group differences among Black women, particularly by exploring how socioeconomic status shapes their experiences and interpretations of the SBW schema (Taylor et al., 2021; Volpe et al., 2022).

Other Relevant Social Factors: Age, Stereotypes, Parental Status

Age. Black women's experiences with the SBW schema may depend on their life stage. Black women in established adulthood, in particular, are likely to be subject to strong pressures to conform to the SBW. Established adulthood is a period coined by Mehta et al. (2020), describing a phase in U.S. adult development characterized by balancing several responsibilities including childcare, career advancement, and establishing committed relationships (Mehta et al., 2020). This is a stage in which caring for others (e.g., children and aging parents) and acting agentically (e.g., through leadership roles at work, in the family, and in the community) are both high (Mehta et al., 2020). Ranging from 30 to 45 years old, Black women in this phase may be expected to remain self-sufficient while attempting to manage several critical responsibilities. A recent study cited the need for additional examination of how Black women are contextualized within the established adulthood theory; in particular, findings demonstrated that Black women in this phase did not fulfill the attributes of the theory (e.g., financial stability; Erving, McKinnon, Thomas Tobin et al., 2024; Mehta et al., 2020).

Furthermore, findings from a study exploring the association between the SBW schema and mental health outcomes among Black women demonstrated the relevance of the schema in middle-aged participants' lives, which were reportedly characterized by balancing financial security, long-term romantic relationships, and childcare (Jones et al., 2021). A recent study examining endorsement of the SBW among Black women of different age groups reported middle-aged (38–59) Black women reported the highest level of endorsement compared to younger (28–37) Black women (Bailey, 2018). This finding indicates that Black women in the established adulthood phase have the highest endorsement of the SBW and likely align themselves with the schema, while navigating the responsibilities accompanied by the established adulthood phase.

Other Stereotypes. Although there are other stereotypes of Black women, the SBW stereotype may be more relevant to established adults than the others. For example, a study examining Black women's endorsement of the Jezebel stereotype (i.e., a trope depicting Black women as promiscuous and oversexed) found that the stereotype had a higher endorsement among younger (i.e., ages 18–34 years) compared to middle (i.e., 35–54 years) and older (i.e., 55 years and older) groups (Brown et al., 2013;

Thomas et al., 2004). Another stereotype depicting Black women, the Mammy, is described as an asexual, non-threatening caretaker (Sewell, 2013). Previous research explains that this stereotypical figure is typically depicted as an older Black woman (DeMarco, 2023). Taken together, these findings demonstrate the relevance of the schema to Black women in the established adulthood phase, during which adults must balance competing priorities including childcare, career, and committed relationships (Mehta et al., 2020).

Parental Status. The SBW schema is described as "central to motherhood," in which the role of the SBW schema influences Black women's parenting (Malcome, 2024). In a study examining Black mothers' perceptions of the SBW schema, findings demonstrated that the schema influenced their approaches to and perceptions of their roles as mothers (Dow, 2015). Among those who endorsed the SBW schema, participants experienced pressure to remain self-reliant and refused to seek help, despite recognizing the need for it (Dow, 2015). The SBW schema is deemed a cultural mandate in which Black women can feel pressured to align their behaviors with the role (Thomas et al., 2022). In the context of parenthood, the SBW schema may present additional challenges for Black mothers, as they perceive that others expect them to fulfill the role of the SBW schema (Malcome, 2024). In sum, several factors may influence Black women's perceptions of and experiences with the SBW schema.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine the influence of SES on Black women's perceptions of their ability to fulfill the SBW schema. Currently, there is a dearth of research on how SES may differentially affect Black women's experiences with the SBW schema. The present study aimed to address these potential differences among Black women with varying socioeconomic backgrounds. We relied on intersectionality theory as our metatheory for investigating how Black women's class (or socioeconomic) status intersects with their race and gender identity to influence their perception of the SBW schema. We also used the agentic-communal model as our guiding theoretical framework to examine how the presence of economic advantages or disadvantages (i.e., SES) influence how Black women perceive and experience the SBW schema. In an effort to understand how these multiple identity intersections may affect Black women's experience with and perceptions of the SBW, the present study explored how Black women in established adulthood negotiate the SBW's expectations for agency and communion in light of their social class. Our research questions, therefore, were as follows:

- RQ1: What is the experience of the SBW schema among higher and lower SES adult Black women in the U.S.?
- RQ2: What aspects of SES (i.e., income, education) might be the most relevant to Black women's experiences with the SBW schema in adulthood?

Method

Participants

The sample included a total of 20 U.S. participants between the ages of 30 and 45 years ($M = 37$) who self-identified as African American or Black women. Ten participants were categorized as lower SES and 10 were categorized as higher SES based on self-reported income and education level. Higher SES participants reported a range in income from $100,000 to $250,000 ($M = \$134,400$) and lower SES participants reported a range from $15,000 to $88,000 ($M = \$42,100$). In addition, overall, 75% ($n = 15$) of all participants reported having obtained a bachelor's degree or higher (i.e., bachelor's or professional degree). Higher SES participants reported education level ranged from bachelor's to doctorate degree ($m = $ master's degree). Lower SES participants' education level ranged from some high school to a master's degree ($m = $ bachelor's degree).

African American women, specifically those who are working or middle class, often feel obligated to financially support relatives, especially those who are economically disadvantaged (Hill, 2022; Sacks et al., 2020). In the present study, income and education, alone, were not sufficient to categorize participants as lower or higher SES. Therefore, we also considered caretaker status and the average income of the participant's reported locations (e.g., cost of living) to account for differences in SES, particularly between those with and without dependents (Bhutta et al., 2020). For example, a participant with a reported income of $90,000 a year may be considered low to middle income if they have dependents (e.g., children).[1] In considering the cost of living based on participants' reported city, one participant with a dependent (i.e., child living at home) had a reported annual income of $59,000 in a city where the median income is about $94,000. This participant was categorized as having a lower SES. In all, 65% ($n = 13$) of all participants were mothers and 65% ($n = 13$) were partnered (i.e., not single). Among those who were mothers, 62% ($n = 8$) were categorized as lower income and 32% ($n = 5$) were categorized as higher income. Among participants who were partnered, 54% ($n = 7$) were higher income and 46% ($n = 6$) were lower income. For detailed information on the sample demographics, please refer to Table 1.

Procedure

This study was approved by our institution's IRB. Various methods were used to recruit participants, including (a) posting flyers on social media platforms, (b) sending flyers through email, (c) snowball sampling, and (d) the recruitment site, Prolific. Recruitment emails were primarily sent to potential participants (i.e., Black women faculty and students in higher education programs) to participate in the study and distribute the flyer. Similarly, professional Black women in the authors' network were contacted about participation and sharing the flyer with others. The flyer shared included inclusion criteria, contact information, and that the study was approved by our institutions' IRB. Eligibility requirements included: identification as a Black or African American woman, between the ages of 30 and 45, U.S. resident, and English-speaking.

The first author conducted all of the semi-structured interviews in 2021. These interviews were described as a conversation with "a blend of closed- and open-ended questions" (Adams, 2015). Interviews were guided by open-ended questions inquiring about participants' overall perceptions of the SBW schema, their level of endorsement of the schema, and perceived obstacles with enacting strength. All interviews were virtual and conducted via Zoom. After the first author introduced themselves and provided a brief overview of the interview topics, participants were asked to consent to having the interview recorded so that it could be transcribed afterwards. The interviews lasted about 20 to 45 minutes. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. Examples of the interview questions included: (a) How do you feel about the idea of Black women being strong? Does it evoke a positive, negative, or mixed feeling? (b) Do you feel as though you benefit from being a strong Black woman? If so, what do you feel that you gain? (c) When and why do you choose to be strong? (d) What, if anything, in your life makes it harder to be strong? (e) What, if anything, makes it easier to be strong? Upon completing data collection, all interviews were transcribed by the first author and a research assistant.

Positionality

My positionality as a Black woman inevitably informed both the interview process and the interpretation of the data in this study. I, the first author, am a Black American, cisgender woman and 5th year graduate student at a Hispanic-serving institution. I was raised in an upper-middle class home with two parents who have each obtained a master's degree. My research is interdisciplinary and examines the racialized gender stereotypes impacting Black women and the contexts in which stereotypes (i.e., the SBW) impact Black women's health outcomes. I have spent the entirety of my scholarship exploring this particular phenomenon that is exclusive to Black women and have a personal connection with the SBW schema. These experiences likely influenced how I interpreted the data collected; thus, myself and the second author used qualitative checks to minimize potential bias. I attempted to intentionally engage with

Table 1. Demographic Information.

Chosen Pseudonym	Age	SES Group	Income	Edu. Level	Caretaker	Median Income in Reported Location[a]	Specifics on Caretaking
Ashlee	30	Lower	46 K	Some college	Yes	$51,707	1 child living in home
Ashley	43	Lower	15 K	Bachelor's	No	$70,723	2 children, not living in home
Bird	34	Lower	59 K	Master's	Yes	$94,755	1 child living in home
Candace	41	Higher	300 K	Master's	Yes	$108,649	1 child living in home
Chloe	31	Lower	60 K	Associate's	No	$55,339	Living with parents and assists financially; No children
Corey	39	Lower	88 K	Bachelor's	Yes	$106,287	2 children living in home
Issa	32	Higher	125 K	Master's	No	$67,760	No reported dependents
Jane	36	Lower	53 K	Bachelor's	Yes	$79,713	1 child living in home
Jay	30	Lower	50 K	Some college	Yes	$82,855	Grandfather & fiancé are dependents
Kelly	38	Higher	200 K	Doctoral	Yes	$112,470	1 child living in home
Mary	42	Higher	150 K	Master's	No	$97,369	No reported dependents
Mo	40	Higher	250 K	Doctoral	Yes	$49,944	2 children living in home
Nicole	44	Higher	110 K	Bachelor's	Yes	$65,359	2 children, one living in home
Red	42	Lower	70 K	Some College	Yes	$62,027	Caretaker to several family members, 1 child in home
Reneé	34	Higher	200 K	Bachelor's	Yes	$78,137	2 children living in home
Shantell	37	Lower	20 K	Some High School	Yes	$50,994	1 child living in home
Summer	30	Higher	250 K	Doctoral	No	$250,000+	No reported dependents, living with parents
Tamara	34	Lower	89 K	Bachelor's	Yes	$76,081	2 children living in home
Theresa	34	Higher	170 K	Master's	No	$80,366	No reported dependents
Tia	36	Higher	100 K	Master's	No	$79,393	No reported dependents

[a]Median income is reported based on U.S. Census Bureau data (n.d.).

the research via memoing to (a) keep track of how my personal thoughts and experiences may impact my interpretations of the data; and (b) strengthen my ability to connect with and bring an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences to coding. The second author is a white American, cisgender woman, and professor at a Hispanic-serving institution. She has an M.A. and Ph.D. in Social Psychology and an M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Her program of research investigates how the intersection of identities such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class impact relationships with power. She has extensive experience with qualitative, mixed methods, and quantitative research designs.

Research Design

The present study utilized qualitative methods, which are especially relevant given that our sample (a) was multiply marginalized and (b) were all subject to internalizing the SBW schema. Qualitative approaches often incorporate direct quotes from participants, allowing their voices to be the center of the study's data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Rockmann & Vough, 2023; Smith, 2024)—an important approach to take when working with populations whose voices have been systematically silenced. Moreover,

qualitative methodology permits researchers to gain deeper insight into how their participants perceive and navigate a specific phenomenon, such as the SBW schema. Qualitative research also provides context often missing from quantitative studies (Geertz, 1973). This context was crucial to the present study, as authors were examining perspectives of the phenomena based on socioeconomic status. The participants' economic standing provided the context for which to explain the "why" behind their reported perceptions of the SBW schema.

Specifically, we used a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994)—a qualitative research method used to examine the experiences of individuals experiencing a similar phenomenon: in this case, the SBW schema. This approach is useful for examining the unique experiences shared by members of a particular group through methods such as semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dodgson, 2017). Specifically, this approach, typically performed using interviews, allows scholars to compound participants' experiences with a phenomenon to describe the nature of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Among all qualitative approaches, the phenomenological approach primarily aims to gain a more in-depth understanding of the "what" and how" of participants' experience (Benner, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Using a phenomenological approach also increases the likelihood of collecting a dataset that will provide a wealth of information that can inform future research, policy, and practice (Stake, 1995). Previously, authors have taken this approach to examine Black women's experiences with various phenomena, such as stereotype threat and tokenism among Black women leaders in higher education, persistence in STEM among undergraduate college Black women, and experiences with health disparities among older Black women (Chance, 2022; Foster et al., 2023; Morton, 2020).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is described as a method used to examine themes and determine potential patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method of data analysis allows researchers to describe and center the thoughts and perspectives of participants. The data were coded by both authors. By using thematic analysis, authors were able to identify themes regarding Black women's experiences with the SBW schema and enacting strength.

To begin analysis, three transcripts were randomly selected: one from the lower SES group and two from the higher SES group. Authors analyzed the transcripts independently, identifying potential codes related to the research questions. Authors then met to review their codes and develop the codebook. During each discussion, the authors referred back to the first author's memos created during data collection. Memos were critical during data collection and analysis as they were used to (a) edit and review the interview guide based on participant responses, (b) to guide the creation of the initial codebook at the start of data analysis, and (c) to engage in persistent observation (i.e., repeatedly reviewing transcripts) and reflect on the relevance of each code (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Authors repeated this process with three more transcripts and established sufficient inter-rater reliability ($k = 0.71$). Finally, once in agreement about the themes, authors continued until they finalized the codebook and all transcripts were coded. The research questions guided the process of selecting the final themes that were presented in this study. Codes were defined based on an amalgam of participants' self-described experiences with each theme.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, we utilized a validated research methodology (i.e., phenomenological approach; Shenton, 2004). In addition, the first author practiced memoing between interviews, making notes of emerging themes and differences in participant experiences during data collection. Memoing is described as documenting one's reflections to gain a deeper understanding of the data that may be used in all qualitative approaches (Birks et al., 2008). Memos were then discussed

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes.

Higher-Order Themes	Subthemes/Codes
Challenges of the SBW	Burnout
	No one to depend upon
Origins of strength	No choice
	Access to economic resources

with a mixed methods senior researcher with years of experience conducting qualitative research. Specifically, following individual interviews with participants, the first author took notes of new insights and discussed their reflections with the senior researcher to revise probes for the following interviews. The senior researcher was also involved in coding the interview data, which included "persistent observation," or rigorously reviewing the data multiple times before establishing codes, to ensure inter-rater reliability between the first and second researcher (Cole, 2023; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The first and second author also provided their positionality statements, describing their identity, background, and previous research experience (Shenton, 2004). Second, to establish dependability, we provided an in-depth overview of the methodology and procedure to allow for future researchers to replicate the present study (Shenton, 2004). Lastly, transferability was established through describing the research methodology used in detail, providing transparent descriptions of the length and amount of interviews conducted, descriptions of the sample population, and the time period in which the data were collected (Shenton, 2004).

Results

Authors created a long form final codebook that included 12 final codes. To organize the codes, the authors organized each code into one of four higher-order themes. The original final 12 codes thus became 12 subthemes, or codes. As summarized in Table 2, the included themes constructed from the data included two major themes: (1) "challenges of the SBW" with two sub-themes: burnout and no one to depend upon; and (2) "origins of strength" with two sub-themes: no choice and access to resources.

Overall, four codes were distinguished as most relevant to the present investigation: (a) having no choice, (b) access to economic resources, (c) having no one to depend upon, and (d) experiencing burnout. Codes were deemed significant when they addressed our research questions, provided new insights about the phenomena under investigation, and/or were relevant to the utilized framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006; Maxwell, 2013). Informed by intersectionality theory and the agentic-communal model, the selected subset of codes provide insight into participants' views of the SBW schema based on their access to power (i.e., SES).

Burnout

Previous literature describes burnout as loss of interest, emotional exhaustion, frustration, and feelings of ineffectiveness (Lawrence et al., 2022). This final code was prevalent among both SES groups and was the most frequent code cited among all codes. Sixty-five percent of participants overall reported feeling physically and emotionally fatigued in regard to meeting the expectations of the SBW schema. Although this code was highly cited among both groups, it was slightly more frequent among participants in the higher SES group (85% reported burnout) than the lower SES group (75% reported burnout). In response to the question, "What are the responsibilities of Black women, in your opinion?", one participant responded, "It's interesting when you say the responsibility of Black women, because in some ways, we've had this responsibility for the culture, for our people, for our families. And I'm kind of tired of that" (Issa, Higher SES, $125,000, no children, Master's degree). Similarly, in response to the same question, another participant expressed,

> I feel like a lot of expectations and responsibilities get put on us that are higher than for other people. I feel like the bar is set higher. We're expected to do more work… Just that level of expectation and responsibility. It's kind of an unrealistic thing put on us (Theresa, Higher SES, $170,000, no children, Master's).

In the same way, other participants also described a similar disposition regarding expectations they perceived to be placed on them as Black women. For example, in response to the question, "Do you think of yourself as a strong Black woman?", she replied,

> I don't… It's just the connotation of it now, what people have turned that into. The reason that I don't like it is because people have then turned that into, 'Well because you are a strong Black woman, you don't need help. You don't deserve to. You're not allowed a safe space like women of other races are.' They're allowed to be vulnerable; they're allowed to have a bad day. They're allowed to cry. But Black women aren't allowed to do that (Mary, Higher SES, $150,000, no children, Master's degree).

Similarly, among lower SES participants, burnout was a prevalent theme. One participant described obligations of constant strength as exhausting, stating, "Sometimes you get tired of being the one having to [be strong]. 'You know, I just need a break today.' There have been times where I needed a break. Even if it was just for a few hours" (Red, Lower SES, $70,000, one child, some college). Lastly, another participant explained that adherence to the SBW was overwhelming,

> If I was able to relinquish some of the roles [that I have taken on] I wouldn't have so much on my plate and I wouldn't feel the need to control everything. And it probably would lessen my anxiety about everything (Ashlee, Lower SES, $46,000, one child, some college).

In sum, several participants from both SES groups expressed feelings of exhaustion, indicating a need for more support. The type of support appeared to be dependent on SES; specifically, lower SES participants need more economic support and higher SES participants needed more social support to potentially mitigate burnout. In addition, participants reported disappointment with consistently being expected to adjust their behavior to match that of the SBW schema. According to participants, others view Black women as resilient and thus do not view them as needing support, assistance, or compassion. Participants believed they were not given opportunities to convey vulnerability to others.

No One to Depend Upon

In both groups, participants perceived that they had no one to depend upon and had to manage on their own. Participants often discussed serving as a pillar of support for others without receiving reciprocated support. Importantly, this code was much more frequent among participants in the higher SES group, with 75% of participants in the higher SES group describing feelings of not having people to rely on compared to 25% of participants in the lower SES group. Participants in this code described feeling drained as a result of exercising strength with little to no perceived support. For instance, authors posed the question, "Is there anything in your life that makes it easier to be strong?", a participant replied,

> I think that people tend to lean on you and honestly tend to lean on your strength. And when you have times where you're not as strong, you don't have people to lean on. You don't have someone to provide that same level of strength back to you (Candace, Higher SES, $300,000, one child, Master's degree).

Likewise, a participant explained that her strength was a constant requirement that supported other people's needs. In response to the question, "What are the responsibilities of Black women in your opinion?", she said,

> We have to be the strong pillar right beside him so he can accomplish everything. You often do need that strong woman. And it's true, especially in my marriage. I think it's true all around… And that often falls to the Black woman. Just to sort of be that pillar of strength and that comfort. You know, all the time (Nicole, Higher SES, $110,000, two children, Bachelor's degree).

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment when asked, "Do you feel like you miss out on anything from being strong?", she replied,

I think it's just having someone else to lean on not to be as stressed. Because I'm the type of person that I over analyze and overthink things. And I think if I had more assistance from someone else, I would save myself a lot of headaches. Because you can do a lot of physical damage to yourself by stressing out. And I do get physical effects of me stressing out and not wanting to ask people for help. I get headaches or stomach aches (Mary, Higher SES, $150,000, no children, Master's degree).

Lastly, another participant expressed feeling isolated in predominantly white spaces in which she was often the only member of her racial group. In response to when she chooses to be strong, she stated,

I have been in a position where, often times, not necessarily the first Black person, but often the only [Black person] and only Black woman. So, you do feel a burden of responsibility to be the leader, to be strong (Issa, Higher SES, no children, Master's degree).

Overall, participants in the higher SES group perceived a lack of reciprocated social support and, as a result, expressed feelings of disappointment in which they were not afforded opportunities to be vulnerable. This finding also demonstrates that higher SES participants may have perceived less social support due to the racial makeup of their environment (i.e., workplace, neighborhood).

No Choice

This code describes the experience of participants who expressed feeling as though they had no choice but to enact strength or remain strong. A recurring theme within the data was the belief that strength was not an optional characteristic, regardless of whether participants personally endorsed the SBW schema. This code was prevalent among both SES groups; however, it occurred slightly more frequently among participants in the lower SES group, with 56% of the participants from the lower SES group expressing feelings of having no choice but to remain strong compared to 44% of the participants in the higher SES group. For some participants in the lower SES group, the experience of having "no choice" resided in their responsibility to serve or provide for others who depended on them. For example, in response to the question about how she cares for and helps the people in her life who are dependent on her, a participant stated that,

It could be financially, sometimes emotionally, mentally, even so wise physically. I would say, just overall I'm always on. The

only time I'm off is when they're not around and I'm alone. But that's seldom in terms of how frequent that is... it's a constant battle because I know it's a position that I have to play (Bird, Lower SES, $59,000, two children, Master's degree).

Similarly, another participant expressed that strength was necessary for survival. In response to the question posed, "When and why do you choose to be strong?", she replied, "In general, just everything that's going on in the world, you have to be. If you sit back and let things happen, you're going to get stepped on" (Shantell, Lower SES, $20,000, three children, some high school). According to Shantell, strength was a requirement and a tool used to avoid disrespect or disregard from others, safeguarding her agency.

Other participants instead viewed strength as a requirement because they viewed the SBW as critical to their identity. In particular, in response to the question, "Do you think of yourself as a strong Black woman?", a participant explained,

Yes, the short answer is I do. I suppose I feel like I had to. Growing up being the eldest of three, I've had to kind of adopt that strong persona. I suppose with the expectation of society being the strong Black woman, you are a Black woman therefore you have to be strong; you have to shoulder whatever life throws at you and just keep going. I feel like that's my role in life. That's who I am (Jane, Lower SES, $53,000, one child, Bachelor's degree).

In sum, lower SES participants expressed a lack of choice in remaining strong to maintain their many responsibilities. This finding indicates that some participants, in order to persist despite adversity, view strength as inherent.

Access to Economic Resources

The second code describes the perception that having access to economic resources made it easier to enact strength. For each SES group, 10% of participants from each SES group spontaneously addressed access to economic resources as impacting their ability to be strong. Within the higher SES group, one participant voiced that having a higher income (in addition to no dependents) made it easier to be strong. Specifically, in response to the question, "What makes it easier to be strong?," she explained that,

I'm in a better financial position than a lot of people I know. A lot of people are in my family. So that helps me because I don't need to rely on anyone for financial help. So, when it comes to finances, I don't have to rely on anybody for that. And because I have that, I think that is one of the things that allows me to be strong (Mary, Higher SES, $150,000, no children, Master's degree).

In comparison, in the lower SES group, a participant discussed that not having a sufficient income was a direct barrier to enacting strength. Regarding the question, "What makes it harder to be strong?," she replied, "I think my personal situation right now… That's definitely making it harder to be strong. If I had my own job, then it would be easy to be strong" (Ashley, Lower SES, $15,000, two children, Bachelor's degree).

Taken together, these quotes demonstrate that SES affects both Black women's perceptions of their ability to enact strength, but also their actual ability to be independent. Not having to rely on others to execute decisions and complete tasks due to financial independence enables higher SES Black women to conform more to the myriad expectations of the SBW and enact their agency. This finding may be explained by the agentic-communal model, which proposes that higher SES positions an individual towards agency and independence (Rucker et al., 2018).

Discussion

The current study revealed that Black women across socioeconomic status (SES) levels feel a powerful obligation to embody the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema, resulting in high levels of burnout regardless of class background. While both higher and lower SES participants endorsed the SBW and reported exhaustion, the forms of strain they experienced varied by SES: lower SES women described lacking the financial resources needed to sustain strength, while higher SES women reported social isolation and having "no one to depend on." These findings demonstrate that overlapping systems of race, gender, and class oppression produce distinct—but not necessarily lesser—burdens for more privileged women (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, these findings support the agentic-communal model (Rucker et al., 2018) by revealing how access to economic resources may enhance agency, while lacking social support in elite spaces may constrain it. The prevalence of burnout across SES groups also aligns with theories of *unmitigated communion* (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999), suggesting that the SBW schema may reflect an imbalance between agency and communion, wherein caring for others comes at a cost to the self.

Most foundational research on Black women's experiences with the SBW has not considered SES (e.g., Abrams et al., 2014; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). However, recent quantitative research has examined the SBW in relation to SES, finding either similar levels of endorsement across class (e.g., Platt & Fanning, 2023) or slightly higher endorsement among lower SES women (e.g., Erving, McKinnon, Van Dyke et al., 2024). Additional work has found that the relation between SBW endorsement and poor health is strongest among Black women with high financial strain (Erving, McKinnon & Thomas Tobin et al., 2024). However, none of this work has investigated how Black women personally make sense of and experience the SBW at different levels of SES. Knowing Black women's own understandings of and experiences with the SBW at different levels of SES sheds additional light on whether and how SES relates to SBW endorsement, and why SBW endorsement may have a worse impact on the health of lower SES women.

Burnout

Experiencing burnout from the expectations of the SBW was the most prevalent code among both groups of participants. This is consistent with previous research showing that the SBW can lead to compassion fatigue and role overload (Abrams et al., 2014; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007), which can negatively affect Black women's health (Tipre & Carson, 2022).The fact that burnout was high among both of our SES samples may be the result of each group lacking a different kind of coping resource: economic resources for those lower in SES and social resources for those higher in SES. In effect, neither group was able to effectively fulfill the racialized gender role of the SBW because of the impossible demands and imposition of multiple, intersecting forms of oppression. Viewing Black women through an intersectional lens enabled this discovery and informs the agentic-communal model. Moving forward, when using the agentic-communal model, it will be important to consider not just the power one has as a result of a unidimensional social identity (e.g., race, religion, gender), but the opportunities and burdens that might result from complex identity intersections with emergent effects.

Another potential explanation for the high levels of burnout across SES groups may be attributed to the influence of unmitigated communion. Previous literature defines this term as lacking agency while solely focusing on others (Helgeson & Fritz, 1999). Notably, unmitigated communion describes an individual who neglects themselves as a result of being overly attentive to others- a defining feature of the SBW. Unmitigated communion can be viewed as an extreme form of communion resulting in an imbalance in giving and receiving care that results in a host of negative well-being outcomes, including burnout and interpersonal difficulties (Ghaed & Gallo, 2006; Helgeson et al., 2015). Responses from participants in the present study may be explained by their engagement in unmitigated communion in service of enacting the SBW schema. In addition, caring for others to the detriment of the self, a core attribute of the SBW schema (Abrams et al., 2019), may also explain the reported high level of burnout.

No One to Depend Upon

The third code, "no one to depend upon," indicated that participants felt they did not have people in their lives to rely on for reciprocated support, but were expected to remain strong for others. Importantly, this finding was more common

among participants in the higher SES group, highlighting a persistent disadvantage experienced by Black women even when they have relative power (e.g., higher SES). This disadvantage was uncovered using an intersectional approach, which posits that overlapping forms of privilege and oppression do not have merely additive or subtractive effects, but emergent and often surprising ones (e.g., Pedulla, 2014).

Higher SES participants in this code described experiencing isolation, in which they were often the only Black woman in predominantly white environments, such as the workplace or neighborhoods. In contrast, due to both necessity (Collins, 2000), and for reasons such as being more likely to live in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Greene et al., 2017), lower SES Black women did not report lacking connections with their communities as often. Higher SES Black women's experiences align with research on tokenism, in which individuals from marginalized groups are placed in settings where they represent their entire identity group (Kanter, 1977). Black women in leadership roles, in particular, frequently report feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging due to their tokened status (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Dickens et al., 2019; Erskine et al., 2020; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015).

Tokensim, which occurs when institutions or groups accept a small number of minority individuals to give the impression of diversity, can create psychological and social strain for Black women (Sobers, 2014; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Research analyzing the experiences of Black women in the workplace and in academic spaces reported participants felt unwelcomed and treated as outcasts by their peers (Dickens & Womack, 2020; Shavers & Moore, 2019). The present study supports these findings, especially for higher SES women. Furthermore, having "no one to depend upon" can affect Black women's overall wellbeing through creating feelings of loneliness, isolation, and emotional and mental exhaustion (Walker, 2016; West, 2015). Indeed, a study examining the SBW schema among Black women found that higher endorsement was associated with decreased perceived emotional support (Watson-Singleton, 2017).

Taken together, these findings add to the body of literature that finds that SES may not always be a protective factor for Black women's health outcomes. Specifically, SES may not guard Black women in predominantly white environments against experiencing isolation and tokenism. For example, Black women with a higher SES have financial security and economic resources but experience less connection within their community, perhaps because they are navigating non-Black spaces more frequently (e.g., neighborhood, workplace). In contrast, lower SES Black women likely have more connection within their community, due to necessity and being more likely to live in predominantly Black neighborhoods (Greene et al., 2017). Overall, there were more similarities than differences among participants across SES groups. However, having a higher SES may potentially make it easier to enact the SBW schema and be self-sufficient.

No Choice

The "no choice" code indicated the SBW schema felt like an obligation for many participants in both the higher and lower SES groups, for shared and divergent reasons. In terms of differences, those in the lower SES group reported that they had no choice but to continue being strong for others in the absence of financial resources and support. Women discussed managing careers, household labor, and caregiving without access to childcare, house workers, or other forms of financial assistance. In terms of similarities, Black women of all SES backgrounds experienced expectations from others (e.g., family members, coworkers, community members) to align their behaviors with the SBW schema (Geyton et al., 2022). This work converges with existing findings that the obligation to uphold the SBW may be nearly universal for Black women in the United States (Nelson et al., 2016).

Access to Economic Resources

Our findings also demonstrated that having access to economic resources, and a sufficient income in particular, provided the necessary stability to exercise and sustain strength, marking one difference between the higher and lower SES groups. As a result of such income disparities, the SBW schema might have a more negative impact on lower SES women compared to higher SES women (Erving, McKinnon, Van Dyke et al., 2024). Although high income among Black women is related to lower levels of stress and illness (Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008), the shared experience of gendered racism among all Black women may lessen the positive effect of income on wellbeing (Assari, 2018).

These findings on access to economic resources were also aligned with the principles of the agentic-communal model, which states that those with social privilege are more inclined towards independence. In the present study, participants with a higher SES expressed a sense of advantage that they explicitly tied to having greater agency, while those with lower SES explicitly expressed that a lack of resources made it harder for them to enact strength. However, as the following section illustrates, Black women without high SES may nonetheless be able to enact the SBW by drawing strength from their social support networks.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study offers valuable insights, several issues should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and guide future research. One consideration is that the present study included Black U.S. women between the ages of 30 and 45 years. Thus, the findings may not apply to Black women who are not within this age range or who are not living in the United States. Future research should explore

how socioeconomic status influences the SBW schema across diverse age groups of Black women to broaden the current literature. To provide additional understanding, researchers may consider examining how SES influences the experience of the SBW schema across varying age groups. A limitation of the current study is the overrepresentation of highly educated participants (i.e., over 70% had a bachelor's degree or higher), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of Black women in the United States. According to a recent NCES (2024) report, although educational attainment among Black women is rising, a larger proportion still do not hold a bachelor's degree. In contrast, nearly all participants in the current study, including those in the lower SES group, reported having completed some college or more. This may reflect the use of the snowball sampling technique used by authors that relied, in part, on their own academic and professional networks. Future studies might benefit from examining the effects of income and education, separately and interactively, on Black women's experiences with the SBW.

Another limitation of the present work is related to how we measured and conceptualized SES. To determine participants' socioeconomic status, we used four indicators including education level, income, median income of geographic location, and caretaking status. Participants were also asked to subjectively label their social class during their interview, to determine if participants' subjective class status aligned with these indicators. As is common in research on social class in the United States, all but one participant labeled herself as a member of the middle class (or a similar variation such as "lower middle class" or "upper middle class"). Many people in the United States are under the impression that they are a member of the middle class, when in reality, only about 50% qualify as middle class according to indicators such as income (Pew Research Center, 2024; RAND Corporation, 2021).

An additional explanation for the divergence between reported class indicators and self-ascribed class status may be due to the historical and continued gaps in wealth among Black American families in the United States, as their white counterparts possess 10 times more wealth on average (Ray & Perry, 2020). For example, a participant may have reported a higher income (e.g., $170,000), but may not view themselves as high SES because they have not amassed wealth. In sum, our chosen conceptualization of SES in this study presents two issues for future consideration. The first consideration is that future research should more deeply qualitatively probe participants' own understandings of their SES to get a fuller perspective on their self-ascribed labels. The second consideration is that participants' levels of wealth and debt may also be important to consider when determining their SES in future research.

Finally, our study's ability to understand how social class affects Black women's experiences with the SBW is limited by the fact that we did not explicitly explore the sources of

the SBW mandate, such as family, employers, the self, community members, the media, etc. Previous literature finds that the SBW schema is encouraged and endorsed by groups other than Black women (Carter & Rossi, 2019). Participants in the present study alluded to this when saying that others did not provide them with the support they needed (i.e., "no one to depend upon") and when explaining that they sometimes resented being held to the SBW schema. However, it was not always clear who was holding participants to this mandate. For higher SES Black women, it might have been more present in the workplace, resulting in unique challenges to professional development and wellbeing. Meanwhile, lower SES Black women may have seen this expectation more in their local communities. Moving forward, scholars may consider examining how people in Black women's lives, such as male partners or white co-workers, influence diverse Black women's experiences with the SBW schema. In light of these limitations, future research should aim to address these gaps and build upon the current study to deepen our understanding of the SBW schema.

Practical Implications

Although both higher and lower SES Black women in our study experienced high levels of burnout due to the SBW schema, the data suggest that solutions for addressing this burnout may be class specific. Below we outline ways that communities involved with Black women's well-being can use our findings to better tailor support for diverse Black women.

Implications for Health Care Providers. Health care interventions for Black women clients should consider the fact that higher SES Black women may need access to communities of support, while lower income established adult Black women may need access to economic resources. For example, higher SES Black women may benefit more from interventions like sister circles (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011), while lower SES Black women may benefit more from wellness programs that provide or encourage access to concrete resources, such as church-based wellness (Hankerson & Weissman, 2012). Ultimately, health care professionals invested in Black women's well-being need to consider the sources of women's stress based on their race, income, and developmental stage.

Implications for Advocates. The recognition that Black women from different social classes face different but perhaps equally challenging stressors from the SBW may inform targeted advocacy efforts and create class solidarity. For example, advocates working on behalf of Black women may want to intentionally design interclass healing circles, support groups, or storytelling events where Black women can connect through narratives of strength, vulnerability, and care. These interclass communities may enable

the development of resource-sharing practices (e.g., mentorship, sponsorship, financial support for grassroots organizing) to support lower SES Black women, and the provision of same-race, same-gender social support which may be missing from the lives of higher SES Black women.

Implications for Community Members. Our research also has implications for those in community with Black women. By understanding the class-based nuances of the SBW schema, family members, neighbors, and partners of Black women, can help challenge and dismantle it. Acknowledging that Black women are not just unidimensional figures of strength and need and deserve rest and support, regardless of their social class, can reduce unrealistic and harmful expectations of Black women to be strong despite adversity.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by showing that although Black women across socioeconomic classes feel compelled to enact the SBW and experience burnout as a result, the resources they can draw upon—and the unique strains they face—differ by class, highlighting the need for intersectional, context-sensitive approaches to supporting their well-being. Moving forward, we suggest that researchers consider the role of unmitigated communion and tokenism in producing SBW-related burnout among Black women; the experiences of the SBW among women of varying ages; and the role that partners, families, out-group members, and others might play in upholding the SBW.

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ORCID iDs

Zharia Thomas ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6227-4515
Asia A. Eaton ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5954-0541

Note

1. Authors have designated participants based on indicators of SES including income and education. However, authors also considered caretaker status and income relative to the median income of participants' reported location to determine whether participants should be categorized as lower SES or higher SES. For example, within the lower SES group, there are two participants with reported incomes of $88K. Initially, this income level does not appear to be lower SES. Although their educational level was higher (i.e., master's degree), the participant was not partnered, was solely financially responsible for their children, and made less than the median income based on her reported location. Thus, she was assigned to the 'lower SES' group.

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