

## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika

### ADVERTISEMENT:

HOST: Have you ever been referred to as “resilient?” What did that mean to you? What do you think it meant to the person who labelled you resilient?

To some, resilience means survival, and calling someone resilient is meant as a compliment to their ability to survive. But to Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika, that label is not one she seeks for herself or for other Canadians.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is professor Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika.

### PHILOMINA OKEKE-IHEJIRIKA:

As a child of war in South Eastern Nigeria, amidst the ruins of a civil war. I rummaged the landfill of the military base in my village for something to eat: bread, mazarin, cake - discarded by the conquering soldiers that might still be edible. I started kindergarten on day three in 1970, and by 2008 became a full professor in one of Canada's finest universities. Most people would say that I am highly resilient, but the truth is that my experience is not uncommon among Indigenous peoples. Blacks, immigrants, et cetera. My achievements are more due to the kindness of strangers than to resilience.

I'm aware of the millions of far more resilient people I left behind on my way up. The kindness of strangers may reward the resilience of a few, but doesn't confront the systemic barriers faced by the majority. What's my point? Resilience simply defined as the capacity to survive adversity is a gospel that marginalised Canadians should be preaching to the mainstream - not the other way around.

We are already over-resilient. We are already survivors. While I don't devalue or discount the gospel of resilience, I agree with this strength-based approach which are important to Canada. But I wrestled with a concept that is uniformly applied to all cultures and context, despite is inherently Eurocentric, your liberal and individualistic foundations.

Come to think of it, there is no word for resilience in African epistemology. What comes close is the maxim of *Ubuntu*, literally translated as “I am” because we are. *Ubuntu* upholds the inherent dignity and goodness of all humanity, prioritising family and community over the individual. Individuals operate within a web of moral commitments and duties to the broader society. As such self-actualization for people like me goes beyond personal desires and achievements, rather success, interweaves both personal and collective goals.

I'm also suspicious of the connection between resilience and mental health as extended to newcomer populations - people like me. the immigrant paradox syndrome we all have had about is a proven longstanding pattern, which shows that “recent immigrants often out perform more established immigrants and non-immigrants on a number of health, education

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and conduct or crime related outcomes, despite the numerous barriers they face to successful social integration.” My point? We appreciate the benefits of mental wellbeing, but as they would say in my village, we didn't cross, we didn't climb seven mountains and swim across seven seas to get to Canada simply to improve our mental health.

What exactly am I getting at? We need to, re-envision the concept of resilience. Marginalised Canadians do not want to merely survive. They want to thrive to contribute to Canada's economic prosperity and multicultural heritage. So, we need to be given a chance.

We need to be equipped, as one of my research participants said, “I do not expect Canada to put me on a pedestal. All I ask for is a bridge.”

My final thoughts on beginning points to revision and resilience. I think we need a shift from the current paternalistic saviours approach, which infantilize and pathologize, our ways of knowing and being because they put us oblique of knowledge, which informed current service and progress. They do not reflect our realities. Systemic barriers. Like anti-black racism are destroying our families, our communities. As a stakeholder in my research programme of that in astonishment, how can we stop them if we know so little about them?

I want to conclude my thought with a comment from University of Alberta’s Associate Vice President, Dr. Laura Beard. She says that if we consider *Ubuntu* a more dynamic conception of resilience, then we must begin our quest to transform society by understanding not only the mainstream, but also those who live in the margins. We need to understand all of the “I’s” that make up the “we” in this country. We must begin by asking “who are the we as we?” “Who are the I’s that make up that “we” which constitutes Canada. I think I'll stop here. Thank you.

HOST: Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika **is a professor of women's and gender studies and director of the Pan African Collaboration for Excellence (PACE) at the University of Alberta. She spoke at TD Bank Group presents The Walrus Talks at Home: Resilience in May.** And she’s just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled, or virtually zoomed onto the stage at The Walrus Talks and The Walrus Talks at Home.

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