

# The Age of the “Woke” Catwalk Model

by Kaori Nakano



Adwoa Aboah

©Polaris/amanaimages

When a woman is appointed to a top post in a company or organization, it usually makes the news as a “first.” Now we have a new kind of “first,” a story about the first man in a top position until now held by women—in this case, editor-in-chief of a fashion magazine. In August 2017, forty-five-year-old\* Edward Enninful from Ghana was appointed editor-in-chief of British *Vogue*. Not only is he the first male editor-in-chief in the history of British *Vogue*, he’s also the first black person to fill the position. He has a well-established track record as a

charismatic stylist and also possesses a broad network of connections in the film and music industries.

For his first project as editor-in-chief, Mr. Enninful chose the face of Adwoa Aboah for the cover of the December issue of British *Vogue*. Aboah had appeared not only as a cover model for such popular magazines as *i-D* and *LOVE*, but is also highly sought after as a model for everything from high fashion to fast fashion, and was chosen as “Woman of the Year” by *GQ* in 2017.

At 173 centimeters, the twenty-five-year-old\* is

---

not especially tall for a model. Of mixed Ghanaian-British ethnicity, she wears her hair nearly shaved and does not conceal her freckled complexion. But her unique physical appearance is not the only reason driving her popularity.

She is also an activist who speaks out—about her past drug dependence and severe depression leading to attempted suicide. Making the most of her experience of having overcome these difficulties, she has established an organization called Gurls Talk, aimed at helping young women all over the world suffering from emotional problems and other difficulties. On her Instagram account, she intersperses backstage glimpses of glamorous fashion shows with shots of her own sad or introspective expressions, suggesting her darker side.

Aboah is not the only example of a popular activist model speaking out for a cause. The twenty-four-year-old\* black British model Leomie Anderson, a former Victoria's Secret runway model, is another example. She has spoken out publicly about the racism practiced in the fashion world, launching a website where female contributors can write about social issues; she also designs and sells parkas bearing consciousness-raising slogans.

Activist models with strong opinions on diverse social issues, communicating through social media and fighting against discrimination based on race or gender or prejudices against mental health, are called "woke models." "Woke" is a slang term deriving from the passive of "to awaken," meaning being awakened to and having a clear awareness of the contradictions of society or one's own inner conflicts and problems. It appears to have originated in the repetition of the phrase "I stay woke" in the 2008 hit song by Erykah Badu, "Master-Teacher," and has been adopted into general usage.

Up to the 1990s, models such as Kate Moss, who remained silent and mysterious, were the mainstream, but in today's era of social media, models who confront issues, speak out honestly from the heart, and aren't timid about making their opinions known are rising in popularity. Although not models, Prince William and Prince Henry have spoken publicly about how hard it was to lose their mother Princess Diana and the difficulties they had dealing with their pain and grief. When Princess Diana talked about the suffering in her private

life on the BBC in the last century, it caused quite a scandal, but the response to the princes' recent comments was almost overwhelmingly sympathetic, a sign of an important change in the public mood.

The social media of ordinary people—those whose jobs don't put them before the cameras on a daily basis—are often, to a greater or lesser extent, air-brushed fictions. They can make themselves seem more beautiful than a top model with just a flick of the wrist. It is perhaps to be expected that people tired of such emptiness and silliness, or, even though they fully realize it is all a sham, can't help but compare their circumstances to this vain fiction and become depressed, should feel "awakened" by and wish to support the pure-hearted beauty of actual catwalk models who speak the unvarnished truth and show their determination to fight against adversity.

Today, when social media seem to have reached a certain stage of maturity, people are no longer moved by merely superficial beauty. What does the popularity of catwalk models who are "woke," listen to their inner voices, speak out fearlessly, and take action to help others in difficulty, say? Ironically, what social media, with the power to make anyone look glamorous, has actually done is foster a sensibility and an activism to confront the darker aspects of women's experiences and society. We can no longer afford to waste our time fiddling with apps that create fake beauty.

---

## KAORI NAKANO

In addition to authoring columns and series appearing in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and other media, Kaori Nakano is active in a wide variety of arenas as a lecturer, consultant, and copy editor transcending the boundaries of art, media, and business and the author of several books, including *Shinshi no Meihin Goju* ("The Gentleman's World through Fifty Masterpieces," Shogakkan) and *Dandyism no Keifu: Otoko ga Akogareta Otoko-tachi* ("The Lineage of Dandyism: Men Admired by Other Men," Shinchosha). She began her career as a writer at the age of nineteen and completed her undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Tokyo, followed by a period as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University, and is now a specially appointed professor at the School of Global Studies, Meiji University.  
[www.kaori-nakano.com](http://www.kaori-nakano.com)

---

\* As of December 2017