

# Work/Life: Man v woman, or is it woman v woman?

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SINGAPORE - Woman: They say the people against gender equality are not men, but women who made the summit and pulled up the ladder.

It is called the Queen Bee phenomenon, where successful women block policies that support the rise of junior women, as assistant professor of organisational behaviour at Nanyang Technological University Chong Sin Hui tells me.

She says: "It emerges when successful women believe they have made immense self-sacrifices to attain their career achievements, thus they view themselves as being more committed than other junior women.

"They also see themselves as the exception... and tend to self-distance themselves from other junior women, especially those who prioritise family."

These women question why junior women ought not to be put through the same trials and tribulations, says Prof Chong. And if they had conquered gender barriers - childbearing, caregiving, bullying from colleagues in suits - why couldn't junior women do the same, without help or concession?

Unless, of course, these junior women are Not. Determined. Enough?

I am a woman. And Prof Chong's insights are frightfully callous.

I cannot imagine myself pushing colleagues over the bridge of success unless it is over a doughnut, which, in such an instance, both sexes are fair game.

I, however, constantly question why women need token seats on boards or in management, or be singled out as needing a lift.

Isn't the push for gender equality to show men that women are as good? Does not "=" mean the same in sums? Aren't women admitting that we are less good and need topping up when we say "take us to add up"?

I am wrong, wrong, and not quite right on all the three counts, explains Prof Chong.

Ratios for women representation make up for systemic and structural disadvantages that women face, based on the assumption that "if two candidates have equal credentials, it would have taken women greater effort to get there", she said.

So, against a man with equal credentials, the woman is not just as good, but better - because she would have had made dinner, put the kids to bed, fed grandma her pills - while the man was watching Netflix - and still scored the same distinction.

Biologically and physically, "=" is not the same. Women carry babies, give birth and nurse children. These set us back, based on current societal norms and practices, whether we like it or not.

So women need a hand in rectifying policies. Nonetheless, Prof Chong concedes, it is an "uphill task formalising national policies related to gender. We cannot simplistically assume that all men have it easy, and all women have it difficult".

Underlying issues such as women shouldering a lopsided share of household duties and gender stereotyping need to be addressed, though without arbitrary tying of policies to gender, she says.

Gender stereotyping, oh dear.

Secretly, I confess, I wish I had a body like Marilyn Monroe. All those curves and that little waist would make me look fabulous in my slim capri pants. Am I setting back the whole female race here? I fear to even say that out loud.

It is okay, says Prof Chong.

Early feminism might have been about showing men how women could be masculine, be pilots and put out fires like men. It has moved on, she said: "The core of it is to enable all women to feel more powerful and confident of their abilities and bodies, and to allow women to break free from men's dictation and regain ownership of their identity."

Kim Kardashian, Madonna are celebrities who have exploited their sexuality with success, I add.

As long as they do not give the wrong cue that the only way girls can gain power and popularity is through self-sexualisation, says Prof Chong, "then they should enjoy the freedom to do so, and it technically does not go against feminism or set gender equality back".

I am happy after talking to Prof Chong. Women are getting to write the rules of the game, which should be a mixed-doubles, where both genders have stakes to make the other stronger so the team can win.

And dare I say: Men who help aspiring women succeed are incredibly sexy.

Now I believe that women can say what we want and try to win as well.

Man: They say the man gets the last word in any argument he has with a woman: "Sorry."

To avoid that word becoming your last name, it is best not to get on the wrong side of the woman. Just go along - preferably with your mouth shut - on her side, especially when it comes to topics like gender equality.

So, I do. But I am so confused.

First, Mother tells me I am the Man Of The House. MOTH comes with the responsibility to pay for everything that women in the house buy, including and not limited to, her shopping. That is what Father did, and so I should, she says.

Then, Wife tells me I am not doing enough of my share of chores at home. Chores are equal, so what if mummy-in-law says paying for shopping is not.

Lastly, Daughter tells me that her future husband had better not think that she cannot pay her own way in life. But could I pick up her phone bills, please?

It is natural that my directional compass is broken, says Prof Chong. We are in an "on-going renegotiation of gender roles", she says.

So, do I still hold the door for women? Should I send my assistant flowers on her birthday? Should I approve of a boy who splits the tab down the middle when he takes my daughter out, even if he keeps eating the fishballs on her bak chor mee? (Not that my approval is sought.)

"It does not mean that male chivalry has to die," Prof Chong says. "The key perhaps is to regard and enact chivalry as voluntary gestures rather than obligations."

"For example, many Singaporean couples would have applied for a BTO (Build-To-Order) flat years before they make wedding plans. Yet, many Singaporean men will still go on to plan a proposal for their girlfriends despite already knowing that their girlfriends would say yes."

"This is chivalry; an act of thoughtfulness and kindness which can still take place in the face of gender equality."

I am relieved. The workplace is a minefield without a second battleground at home.

Last week, I won an argument against a female colleague to sponsor a junior woman executive to a course. The executive was pregnant, for the third time in the last four years, and my peer felt that she was a quit risk after giving birth.

Frankly, I hate going up against a woman. I'd rather be hustling a man.

After I got my way, I texted the executive my congratulations said how I had always thought she was great, and hinted that I had gone out on a limb for her.

Her response? "You're creeping me out."

So much for gratitude. Though, when it came back to me how I had talked about how "hot" the new secretary was to the boys in the office, I blushed.

But how is a man supposed to act? Remember national service? During my days, we treated it as an initiation for boys to talk dirty, act wise about dirty joints, and try out at least one sleazy karaoke. The more we objectified women, the more we fitted in.

Times have changed, says Prof Chong. "More than a decade ago, Singaporeans celebrated Jack Neo and regarded the portrayals of gender or body size stereotypes in his movies as harmless, humorous jokes.

"However, the backlash with his recent Ah Girls Go Army movie has shown that the mindsets of Singaporeans have shifted."

The local director's latest film drew flak for its ["tone deaf" characterisation of women](#).

For my daughter's sake, I am glad. But it is so hard to navigate. Even Prof Chong agrees that "men are more easily called out" for harassment.

So, men and women need to talk honestly among themselves to agree on what constitutes harassment.

Prof Chong says: "It would be very helpful to incorporate such discussions into family or school conversations to foster a norm of open and candid communication between the genders."

Men have it harder in harassment claims because for a long time, we oppressed and sexualised women, she says. We also rank statistically higher when it comes to abusing the other sex.

I feel embarrassed. I want to set things right. And I want to begin by telling women that for all the crass jokes and banter that I have made about them in the past, "I am sorry".

Listen to the lively podcast between Prof Chong and tech professional Toh Keng Hoe about navigating Queen Bee bosses and how men are coping with the rise of women in tech.