



The Gen X'ers, the X chromosome and the X factor

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Well women may not have taken over the world yet, but people are sure talking about us! The ongoing debate regarding paid maternity leave has stirred a growing consciousness about the place of women in society and particularly in the workplace. In much the same way as the front page of the Herald Sun three years ago showed a young mother with her infant child in a pusher shooting up in a laneway in town and shocked our collective psyche - giving rise to extended debate about supervised injecting rooms and the war against heroin on our streets and in our youth - our attention seemed to have been turned to women and girls and what on earth might be going on with them.

It is often considered poor writer's etiquette to talk about oneself but kindly indulge me for a moment (this is my article!).

Yours truly was engaged at 19, married at 20, but waited till 25 to have our first child. By then some of our friends had been dropping hints about referrals to fertility specialists. I remember living the life of a starving second year uni student (not really true, hubby was on \$12K a year as an entry level accountant), the exhilaration of my first job and feeling rich (for about five seconds) but what I don't remember is ever feeling in my 20's that there was a gun to my head. There was time to work, to laugh, to socialise, have children, to gain qualifications and to be 'successful'. There was no end date and that suffocating feeling of a monster at my shoulder; not even an ephemeral belief that somehow time was running out – not vocationally nor biologically.

I wouldn't blame any young woman today for feeling ripped off. She has been sold a dream – a dream of rhetoric that is often incongruous with reality. She's been told she has the right to dream, to believe in the efficacy of girl power, but as a strong sexy feminine overachieving woman. There's not a lot of room for breast feeding, cracked nipples and stretch marks in that vision of Lara Croft Tomb Raider. And what of the stresses women may experience at work? With just under 10% representation at private sector board level in Australian, women have hardly taken over. But if they think their ascendancy has not been expedient enough, women can be left with self doubt. The truth however may be in the continued existence of gender bias, organisational tardiness to embrace family friendlies and flexible work practices *as well as* their own humility getting in the way.

There are many studies and articles abounding that will give you the relevant statistics. Fifty seven percent of two income families with dependent children have both parents working outside the home. Thirty percent of Australian women will decide not to have children, the mean age for women having their first child is 29.8 years and the current fertility rate has dropped from 3.6 children in 1961 to 1.7 kids now. These and other numbers including the high rate of divorce and the financial and emotional dislocation that ensue are certainly part of the story.



I am not a social research scientist. Yet my consulting practice in workplace justice, my executive coaching clients and even the occasional latté with a girlfriend, are providing me with a sordid account of the discord between the stress in women's lives and the seeming allure of endless possibilities.... and this is not just the case for the Gen X'ers. Some of the baby boomers are now trying to make up for lost time too.

Some Stories

Linda did an MBA, got married late to a man who cherishes her, bore five children in close succession and has now returned to full time study to be a teacher. She oozes competence, can raise \$50,000 on her ear by running a school fete, is on her children's school executive but has moments of intense insecurity about re-entering the workforce in her mid forties. One just senses she will be a most gifted teacher but on a \$40,000 a year start she knows that if she'd made different choices (by the way Linda regrets little), her career progression and her earning capacity would have been vastly different. The difference she says between her predicament and that of a woman of the next generation down is that she is prepared to wait for it all to happen and values her role as a 'super mum'. It is only the fear of having to compete and her wrestle with parental guilt which tires her out and makes her nervous of the workforce.

Megan is 29, extremely attractive, a political journalist for a national paper. She travels extensively, has worked overseas, and her school friends are in awe of her success. She is also single with limited opportunity to get out and meet people because of excessive work demands. There is no shortage of interest by male suitors for casual relationships but many of them want a 'trophy', are self-absorbed or married or both and she won't have a bar of them. She, like many impressive young women of her generation are probably quite intimidating to menfolk who may be imprisoned by political correctness and their views of feminism, perhaps sincerely terrified of disempowering these women or just plain scared of rejection. But back to Megan. She has come to a stage where she now wants babies and from time to time a depression overwhelms her when she looks at her industry and notices all the single, successful and seemingly lonely women she meets.

Dianne qualified in natural therapies, worked outside the home briefly and then had two children. Her time out of the workforce caused her to lose considerable ground in respect of professional development, keeping up with medical advances and products and she has struggled to establish an alternative career. Not working outside the home and with both children now at school she becomes defensive when people ask her what she does. She insists she sees dismay and/or contempt on peoples' faces when they ask her: "What do you do all day?"

Marianne, 34, did law and works for a top tier firm. When I met her she was on the treadmill, working 60 hours a week, and for a sexist autocratic boss who got her to do most of the work and took all of the credit. She was looking forward to having babies (although her husband wasn't as keen) but insisted she would have to attain partnership in the firm before starting a family or she would "never get there". Her determination to have a child is beginning to waiver. Her spouse is apprehensive about the likely disruption to their lives, the restrictions it might put on them to travel, their mutual desire to retain the lifestyle to which they have



become accustomed and her fear for any unborn child who may have to grow up without playmates. She worries (and I do too) about whether or not, whatever she

chooses to do, there will be conflicts and regrets looming large later on. For now she has decided to hold off starting a family but acknowledges truthfully that this delay on a decision may really end up being *the* decision.

There are many who appear to be winning the *Struggle with Juggle* and certainly something I have written about here before. However do you know women like this?

- Women who are working for the barest of margins once child care comes out of their pay packet?
- Women who are harassed or disadvantaged unfairly in their 'dream' workplace?
- Women who are trapped by their fear of failure, excessive workplace responsibility, parental guilt and therefore by the 'sticky floor' rather than the glass ceiling?

We need to continue to write, to provoke thought and to hug all those women who can't reconcile the dreams with the doldrums. In so doing we may, over time, re-align the expectations of future generations to be the self possessed, loved and loving, satisfied and secure women we want them to be; aware of, and serene about, the choices they have made.

Whilst this article has an obvious female orientation to the cases and the challenges I have no doubt that many men are facing their own collective existential crisis which goes way beyond whether or not to tell that joke in mixed company or hold open the door for a female colleague....ah, but for another time!

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