

# ATTACK OF THE ALPHA FEMALE

Watch out, boys! She's lean, keen, and ever so mean—or so the world seems to think. Marie Claire asks: does society fear successful women? **TEXT RENYILIM**

**S**o – what is an alpha female, then? Well, chances are if you're reading this magazine, you're probably one. Aged 25 and above, you work hard and play hard. You're one smart cookie who's good at what you do, you're cool under the line of fire at work, your bank account is firmly in the black, and your credit card doesn't squeal when you purchase that lovely designer bag that you've been thinking about for quite some time. So why, exactly, should anyone have reason to be afraid of you?

If the stereotypes are to be believed, there's certainly reason enough. In the words of one enlightened men's website: "She is obstinate, conceited and doesn't make it easy for you to pick her up. She gives you a run for your money and makes you work overtime on her, so to speak." In other words, you're a ball-breaker. As a dominant female, you're a powerful figure capable of matching a man's performance in the workplace and mirroring his characteristics in your personal life, too. Goodness, you can almost hear them crunching under your stilettos, can't you?

Rest assured—we're rolling our eyes too. It's

rather like watching that moment in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* where an entire roomful of 1970s male television executives turn to each other in horror after a confrontation with the formidable Veronica Corningstone—San Francisco's first female TV anchor—and exclaim, "My God, she's terrifying!" If you find that description grating on you, it's not surprising. You can't exactly dismiss a generation of career women in one fell swoop without raising a few well-shaped eyebrows.

In theory, our automatic response to a question about whether successful women are feared should be a resounding 'no'. After all, just look at this issue—we have ten Women of Style and Substance this year, for the sixth time running, and Marie Claire celebrates the achievements and life stories of women in every issue. (What can we say? We're just a little bit biased.) But what about when we venture outside of the magazine world? How are career women presented, say, in film and television?

Granted, what we see onscreen isn't reality, but it does project very powerful images of our notions of femininity and the experience of what it is to be a working woman—images that continue

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to resonate with us long after we've turned away from the screen. It's not all bad; there are some very positive and inspiring representations of women who've stuck to their guns and toughed it out (sometimes literally) in the office, such as Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil in *G.I. Jane*, Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, female miner Josey in *North Country*, and the eponymous *Erin Brokovich*.

But there are plenty of female characters who send mixed messages about what exactly success at work entails and how it fits in with the rest of their lives. When you compare Cate Blanchett's performance in *Elizabeth*—a film that made its audience so acutely aware of her choice to remain unmarried, out of the fear that marriage would result in the loss of her sovereignty and power—you can already see echoes of the same theme in characters who are at odds with their careers and, in a sense, suffer because of their success.

In *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon's TV career goes like a breeze compared to her personal life, where she's charmingly described by her boss as "single-and-pretending-to-be-happy-about-it, over-scheduled, undersexed". *Sex and the City*'s Miranda, meanwhile, runs into difficulty when she starts dating a man who earns less than she does, and then later has to struggle to make room in her life (and schedule) for a child. The Achilles heel of *The Devil Wears Prada*'s icy editor turns out to be her several failed marriages, while *Erin Brokovich* doesn't entirely come away as the most attentive mother in the film.

Even in *G.I. Jane*, the real villain in the plotline isn't the abusive Master Chief who makes repeatedly brutal attempts to discourage Demi Moore's character from becoming a U.S. Navy SEAL because of her gender, but Senator Lillian DeHaven—another career woman who, this time, is more interested in furthering her own political position than asserting female soldiers' military capabilities. Working women are so frequently turned into objects of scorn, pity, comedy, mistrust—and therefore, fear.

Even outside of a scripted world, women can still face resistance on their path to success, or

even a reluctance to acknowledge them once they've made it. It's not just the work culture in certain industries, but there's even been speculation that women now pose a threat to the male workforce in recession-struck countries. In the U.S., the number of women in the workforce surged over two million between 2000 and 2010, while the number of men employed during the same period of time failed to match it completely.

"I hear many of the same challenges from my female coaching clients in junior roles as I do from my female clients who are now senior," says Suzanne Doyle-Morris, author of *Beyond The Boys' Club: Strategies for Achieving Career Success as a Woman Working in a Male Dominated Field*. "Getting recognition from men

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for their achievements, being heard in meetings, feeling excluded. I think the difference is that younger women often anticipate that these challenges are behind 'modern women' in the 21st century, whereas older women know these experiences too frequently come with the territory."

She also acknowledges that the stereotype of the cold, aggressive career woman still exists, but adds, "As we see more female role models in senior positions modelling a range of leadership styles and lifestyle choices, this stereotype will lose its power." Here's hoping. It's also virtually impossible to deny that being a successful woman comes with plenty of anxiety—not to mention criticism.

"We judge women more harshly than men," is Suzanne's view. "We expect them to have a great career, toned body, perfectly-behaved children, a loving husband and a welcoming home. No woman can achieve the 'ideal' hundred percent of the time, and when she fails, society can be very harsh critics." So perhaps the figure of the successful woman who is able to 'have it all' becomes feared by women too, simply for the unattainable goals she represents.

In a way, are women damned if they do find success in their careers but not their personal lives? "It is not fair, and research shows increasing numbers of women globally are choosing to have smaller families or to not have children at all. They are preferring to get an education, focus on building a career, and in many cases, support their extended families and husbands.

"What is new is how many women, like myself, are actively choosing not to have children rather than simply putting it off until it is too late. Like many women, I have a fantastic career and a great husband and I think 'Two out of three isn't bad!' I think as more women proactively make this choice, the single or childless woman (and why does it have to be child-less instead of child-free?) will be less harshly judged by society."

But as Sophie Le Ray, CEO of naseba group and organiser of this year's Women in Leadership Forum Asia, points out, perhaps attitudes are already changing in Asia: "Reluctance to women leadership has become socially not acceptable in many regions of the world including Asia, pushing the still existing obstacles to less palpable grounds. It is a more subtle hesitation women

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have to face when going up the corporate ladder, made often of a mix of condescending feelings and preconceived ideas about 'feminine values and style of management', more often than we think from women themselves!

"To me, the main challenges come from ourselves: our own lack of confidence, a sense of perfection and self criticism which prevents us from going after our ambitions. We tend as well to believe that we'll be noticed by 'management' thanks to our hard work and talent and forget that building as network within our organisation and exercising leadership over this network will be very important factors of career growth."

Beyond the spectre of the cold, unhappy career woman—whether those fears come from society or simply from within ourselves—there is so much to be gained by us. And despite the warning messages about the price a woman pays for a successful career, it hasn't put us off because we sure as heck aren't showing any signs of backing down from the job market.

It only takes a glance around to remember that there are plenty of us out there still willing to climb the ladder, regardless of the supposed risks. Both Suzanne and Sophie point out that there is no real justifiable criticism that can be made of a woman who has actively chosen to put her work first in her life, especially when it's resulted in her coming out top. "A successful woman is someone who enjoys her work, makes time for her 'life' and feels she is going in the right direction whilst recognising she'll never get to the end of her journey!" explains Suzanne, while Sophie adds: "She's a person who achieved her objectives, regardless of what they are."

Provided that we're satisfied with what we've done or what we're doing, then there's nothing to be afraid of. And if others have a problem with that—well, they'll just have to make room for us anyway. ■■■

