



# A feminine thing?

Diversity specialist and lawyer Stephanie Haladner explains how gender generalisations can damage diversity

As a finance lawyer forever attempting to live up to my job title, I tend to read the FT on the weekend. And despite my job title and best intentions, I inevitably find myself skipping over the latest news on interest rates (with all due respect to Janet Yellen) and diving heart-first into the life & arts section. And it was in that very section where I happened upon a lunch interview with Ariane de Rothschild, chief executive of Edmond de Rothschild, the Geneva-based private bank and asset management group.

Familiar with Ariane I was not – however, as Ariane points out in the article, “there’s not a place, except maybe the African bush, where you say ‘Rothschild’ and people don’t say ‘Aah’. Aah. The lives of successful humans usually make for interesting reading, so I couldn’t help but be drawn in by the mystique of this woman at the top. I learned that she ordered two salads for lunch, about her childhood in Zaire, and how she differs from her husband – a car enthusiast who is ‘happy to spend time relaxing’. But what commanded my attention more than the description of Ariane’s iceberg wedge with blue cheese was her statement that she admires her husband’s ability to relax, namely because she cannot. “I have to be totally hands-on,” she says, “I think it’s a *feminine* thing.”

Aah. A feminine thing? As a woman intermittently rather skilled at the art of chilling out, I wondered if this statement could be true. Is it really a ‘feminine’ thing to be hands-on all the time? Sure, many a mum should be applauded for her hands-on approach to child-rearing, not to mention life in general, but can we really label this trait strictly feminine? Perhaps I’m overthinking, but after reading *Delusions of Gender* by neuroscientist Cordelia Fine, I was

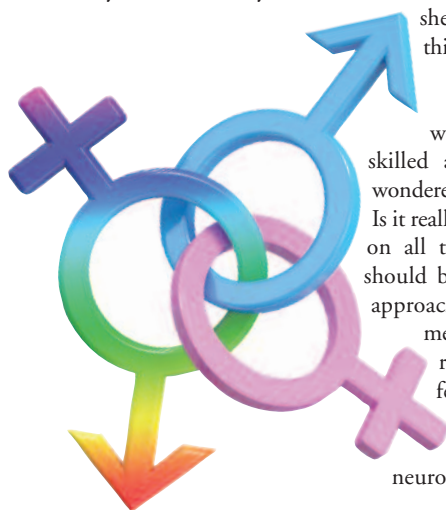
alerted to how critical it is, particularly when you care about advancing women in the corporate world, to not oversimplify gender.

In *Delusions of Gender*, Fine warns us about the dangers of stereotyping in the context of recent popular claims about biological differences between the male and female brain. Fine annihilates such claims by demonstrating that they (1) are based on pseudo-science; and (2) can reinforce stereotypes which ultimately obstruct women’s advancement. One example of how the latter occurs is by amplifying the mismatch between female stereotypes (which include traits such as nurturing, empathetic, supportive) and the stereotypically male requirements for leadership positions (which include traits such as aggressive, analytical, competitive). Fine explains:

“Without any intention of bias, one we have categorised someone as male or female, activated gender stereotypes can then colour our perception. When the qualifications for the job includes stereotypical male qualities, this will serve to disadvantage women”.

Suggesting, for instance, that women are hard-wired for empathy and men are hard-wired for systems can create self-fulfilling prophecies like “As a woman, I just can’t excel at Excel”. While an analysis of the nature and nurture aspects of gender lies beyond the scope of this article, the key point for our purposes is that any conversation around differences between the sexes is risky business that should be handled with rigour and care. Of course we all know that women and men are different. Yet, as seductive as it might be to talk Mars and Venus, reducing male and female behaviour to stereotypes (either by claiming that male and female brains are hardwired or simply by generalising about behaviour) threatens to miss the point of who we are as individuals.

So where does that leave us? As someone who is perhaps guiltier than Ariane de Rothschild of tossing out ad hoc references to that feminine thing, I am now wondering how we can discuss the feminine – and, let’s not forget the equally important masculine – in a way that will help rather than hinder women’s advancement in the workplace. Is there a safe and constructive way to talk about gender differences?



The answer here is, paradoxically, yes and no.

For the yes, let's turn away from the *stereotype* and towards the *archetype*. Joanna Barsh, emeritus director of McKinsey writes about what she calls centred leadership – an approach that unites feminine archetypes with masculine ones, anchored in *purpose*. Centred leaders, per Barsh, do the following:

- Lead from a core of meaning
- Reframe challenges as opportunities
- Leverage trust to create relationship and belonging
- Mobilise others through hope
- Infuse positive energy and renewal to sustain high performance.

Barsh suggests that by embracing a centred leadership model there exists an opportunity for women (and men) to catalyse not just greater gender equality, but a shift in capitalism from a system focused on short-term profit, and the greedy algorithm towards a more conscious capitalism based on long-term value and a return to ethics. *Aah*.



## Reducing male and female behaviour to stereotypes threatens to miss the point of who we are as individuals



Which brings me to the 'no' part of the answer to the question of whether it is constructive to discuss gender differences. As I was writing this article, I had succeeded in sufficiently confusing myself, so decided to phone a friend. In this case, the friend happened to be a deep-thinking member of the male gender who possesses an Oxford education, a hunky chest and considerable experience in the leadership arena (i.e. he is well qualified to offer an opinion). His view was that while examining masculine and feminine archetypes can be instructive, we need a new language that is not gender-laden but instead focuses on ethics and character. Interestingly, Joanna Barsh cites a global survey where two-thirds of respondents wanted to see more feminine qualities in their leaders. These feminine qualities included expressive, reasonable, loyal, patient, collaborative, passionate, empathetic and selfless – and I would add intuitive, emotionally intelligent and what author David Brooks calls epistemological modesty (a fancy way of describing awareness of the limits of our own knowledge) to the mix. While my view is that organisations need to value feminine qualities for more women (and men) who possess these qualities to rise to the top, wouldn't it be cool if we could reach the point where the need to apply gender labels would disappear?

Instead of looking at masculine and feminine archetypes, organisations would simply value a fuller picture of who we are as individuals, and we – the individuals – could focus not on stereotypes or archetypes, but on being fully integrated, conscious and ethical human types. So to all the women in business law: until that time, embrace the authentic feminine and masculine qualities within yourself – and the next time you feel like making like Ariane's husband and relaxing (or cruising around in an Alfa Romeo), feel no guilt, as taking time for ourselves to recharge or to just be is, at its core, a *human* thing.

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