

## Girl Power in the Workplace: A Frozen Ideal?

Ms. Gloria ARLINI (Indonesia)

I recently watched Disney's "Frozen" at the cinema and, like the rest of the world, was instantly charmed by the magical winter tale. The movie was a milestone for Disney, not just in terms of box office numbers but, more importantly, in terms of its bold reversal of the archetypal Disneyesque fairy tale.

Instead of the classic Disney characterization of princesses as passive damsels in distress waiting for their true love to find them, "Frozen" is all about girls in search of their true self and embracing their innate strengths. The main character's struggle as a girl who was always told to "conceal, don't feel, put on a show" lest her immense power be condemned by others parallels the constant mental battle faced by women in patriarchal societies. This led to her moment of rebellion, expressed in a musical number belted out from the mountaintop, a moment of the collective triumph for feminists:

*Let it go, let it go*

*Can't hold it back anymore*

*Let it go, let it go*

*Turn away and slam the door*

*I don't care what they're going to say*

*Let the storm rage on*

*The cold never bothered me anyway*

It is worth mentioning that the song has been translated into 25 languages and ranked among the top tracks on various international music charts.

Has the patriarchal world finally come to terms with feminism?

A week after the movie, a friend of mine had her annual performance review at work. She was told that she needs to tone down her forcefulness at work. The preferred leadership model in her company, a local SME (small/medium enterprise), is to couch firmness behind dulcet tones, sweet smiles and polite demeanors. Sharp tones and firm-sounding emails are too high-handed and may come across as rude, especially coming from a female manager.

In their book "Compelling People", Neffinger and Kohut (2013) identify leaders as being defined by two characteristics: strength and warmth. Essentially, strong people command respect, while warm people are well-liked. And when every leader is judged by the both dimensions, women get worse evaluation than men. Asian women, I'd wager, would probably get the worst.

As with Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Mayer, there are hordes of women

professionals who are still chained by gender stereotypes. They are expected to be nurturing, caring and diplomatic in the workplace—all positive traits, though fixedly one dimensional. Those who assert more strength are seen as arrogant, cold, and difficult to work with. Funnily enough, the moral policing role is as much assumed by women themselves as it is by men.

Then what happens? To compensate, some career women camouflage their displeasure with their colleagues through backhanded ways. They gossip. They always sound positive but conceal subtle criticisms between the lines, forcing others to decode these hidden meanings. They disguise instructions as questions because exclamatory sentences are seen as too strong, and therefore are only reserved for male colleagues. (Men: “Submit the report today.” Women: “You may want to consider expediting the report, perhaps by end of the day?”) At worst, they become manipulative.

Is it more effective? No. Is it a preferred trait? Clearly no. A recent survey finding in Singapore shows that female superiors are much less favored by workers, where 33% respondents say they would be happier working for a male boss, and only 8% said they preferred a female superior (Job Central Survey 2013).

So why do women continue to practice such passive-aggressive leadership style? Getting back to “Frozen”, clearly women are still very much bothered by the “cold” quite literally, in particular, by the perception that they are cold and unfeeling creatures, which is a big no-no in the harmonious ideals of Asian societies. Indeed, how many of us are truly able to “let it go” and say “the cold never bother me anyway”?

I need to insert a caveat here that this observation is not across the board. I have worked with many female supervisors occupying every shade in between the strength-warmth continuum. I have admired female colleagues who are able to draw the line between strength and warmth, thereby creating their own unique brand of leadership. Sadly, the passive-aggressive lot remains the majority, especially in the Asian context with a culture so polite it becomes duplicitous at times.

Clearly there is still a lot of work to be done to push towards greater gender equality in Asian workplaces. We are not just looking at equal job opportunities for men and women but, just as importantly, aiming to dispel subtle social sanctions that come with age-old gender stereotypes. Asian women, in particular, need to truly celebrate their strengths, not to overly censure themselves to conform to outdated demure femininity. Until then, I’m afraid that girl power remains in the realm of Disney’s fairy tales.