

A Successful Woman vs. a Successful Man

Ms. Amelia LO (Hong Kong)

What is success is a question faced by many of us; often probed, considered and pondered at various stages of our lives. Success undoubtedly has many definitions and means something unique as it comprises of our goals, dreams and hopes. It is not static, as it changes during our lives.

In this article, we will consider what success means to those who have recently graduated from college and have been working for less than 10 years, and how the meaning of success varies across genders.

Many single girls long to be involved in a relationship or become a wife by age 30. As for single boys, many long to become well established in their career by age 30. For those married, traditional Confucian expectations still appear to carry great weight. According to a survey conducted by the Women's Commission of Hong Kong with 1,530 participants, more than half of the women and men interviewed who are aged 15 or above believe that married and working women are still expected by society to keep their family as their top priority. Indeed many working women in Hong Kong have to mind their housework and children after a long and laborious day at the office, while their husbands are left off the hook and can enjoy television and drinks after work with their peers. Chinese sayings such as "Man in charge of the outer region, women in charge of the inner region" and "A man with a big mouth is ambitious and will travel widely, while a woman with a big mouth brings poverty and shame to her husband's family" are examples of the line of discriminatory statements so prevalent that they are almost considered proverbs.

Social sentiments and discriminatory attitudes towards ambitious unmarried women or women who do not conform to the traditional Confucian stereotype of the "virtuous wife who blindly obeys her husband and his family" are harsh, and they are often treated as second class citizens. Besides, marriage and child rearing is often seen as the essential goal for those in their 20s and 30s. Societal, peer and family pressure is intense and not many can withstand it, which may lead to girls rushing into marriage and parenthood in an effort to please those around them, and unfortunately some of these marriages later end up in divorces. On the other hand, men are met with less pressure for marriage, and can instead focus and work on their careers. This is perhaps one of the reasons why men surveyed often have higher incomes than women in a similar position, indicating the glass ceiling facing women continues.

So what can we do to change this pattern, which is so ingrained that those university graduates, those supposedly young pillars of society are already affected? Blaming their parents who have imprinted these limiting beliefs and traditional gender stereotypes is hardly the answer, and it is easy for us to ask those habitually bullied into submission to suddenly stand firm and up against their perpetrators, which is often a systemic network of culture and belief. Sometimes we become our worst enemies when we believe and are blinded by these negative stereotypes disseminated by the mass media or well-meaning acquaintances around us. More work has to be done in the primary, secondary and tertiary education, starting from the reading materials, novels and television programs, which should encourage girls not to limit their dreams to being somebody's wife and mother, as worthy as it may be, and explore their other passions and dreams. Boys should be taught to view housework and child rearing as not women's only work, and to treat their future wives with respect and support.

Doing strength-building exercises to stimulate muscle growth and enhance physical strength can also lead to women's empowerment and independence as we become more self-sufficient and self-assured. Participation in social networks and community activities can help women build support networks of friendships and care, and bonds of sisterhood which exist regardless of whether a woman chooses to stay single or become/ remain married.

According to the advertisement of one of my favorite television programmes, "the human genome determines what we are, but the human spirit determines who we are and how far we go." It is time, and up to us, to believe in, respect and accept ourselves and others, step outside and break free of gender restrictions, embrace our unique talent and potentials, and be who we want to be within the confines of the law!