



# WHY WOMEN HATE WOMEN

As greater choice sees more women breaking down barriers at home and in the office, why is the sisterhood often so fast to pass judgement, asks **Ingrid Pyne**.

**K**ERRI-ANNE Kennerley sat reading the gossip column with a growing sense of outrage. It was mid-April, just days after the 55th Logie Awards, and the item in Sydney's *The Daily Telegraph* accused several TV veterans of getting their "breasts out" in revealing dresses at the awards ceremony, in a flagrant bid to impress network executives. Then came the catty coup de grâce. "At 47, [Sandra] Sully, like [Liz] Hayes, Kennerley and [Susie] Elelman, is childless," wrote *The Telegraph's* grand dame of gossip, Annette Sharp. "All four women – confident, beautiful and smart – have given up much for a chance to be television stars. The tragedy is, 30 years on, television bosses need to be constantly reminded."

The line was a lesson in the art of the female put-down: vicious, hurtful, undermining – and sufficiently backhanded and nuanced for Annette to be able to deflect criticism if challenged. Six weeks on, Kerri-Anne is still smarting. "It was just a dirty free kick," she tells *The Weekly*. "She wanted to imply that we hadn't had children because we'd been too focused on furthering our careers, but it was cleverly worded so that she had a get-out-of-jail card. It was hurtful and also ill-informed and unresearched." (Although Kerri-Anne doesn't know the personal circumstances of the other women mentioned in the article, she has once in the past spoken about the pain of her own miscarriage in the early 1990s and her subsequent struggle to conceive.)

It is a basic tenet of modern feminism that women belong to a collective sisterhood. As the kinder and more collaborative sex – or so the theory goes –

we innately seek to nurture and encourage our own. Yet our daily experience in the workplace, on the school drop-off, in mothers' groups, in our choice of magazines and television shows, even sometimes in our own families, turns that conventional wisdom on its head. If women are our sisters, why do we have to watch our backs around some of them?

Dr Lauren Rosewarne, a social scientist at the University of Melbourne, recalls giving a lecture at a feminist conference at the start of her academic career. As she stood up, one attendee sniped to another, "What? Are they giving PhDs to f\*\*\*ing 15-year-olds now?" "This was at a feminist conference," says Dr Rosewarne, laughing, "the one place where you would expect an inclusive and supportive environment, where the ideals of sisterhood and feminism would be promoted, and you wouldn't be judged on how you look."

Such catty comments may seem trivial, even comical. Yet they become less of a laughing matter when you consider how in-fighting is limiting our collective ability to get ahead. In the half century since the Women's Liberation movement, we have come far in removing workplace barriers, but one of the last remaining obstacles is how we treat one another. Stories are rife in offices around Australia about women who reach the top of the ladder, then promptly pull it up behind them, or at least knock out a few rungs. These so-called "queen bees" – immortalised in movies from *The Devil Wears Prada* to *Working Girl* – seek not to develop the careers of younger women, but to derail them. They may limit access to important meetings and committees; withhold information, assignments and promotions; block the path to mentors; chip away at self-confidence; or undermine the professional standing of their rivals through gossip.

Jacinta Tynan, a Sky newsreader and author, has suffered at the hands of at least one female boss. "She would cut me off in meetings, not let me talk; she wouldn't say hello or goodbye to me; she would tell me how another woman was the best newsreader; and she would take notes on what time I arrived at work and

when I made personal phone calls," Jacinta recalls. "And then there was the time she told me about another woman in the office who was pitiable because she was 35, single and never going to have children. I was listening, thinking, 'Well I am 34, single and don't have kids and you know it, so what are you trying to say?'"

Many feminists – including Dr Rosewarne – argue that female cattiness is exaggerated by a misogynistic media and popular culture, where it is portrayed as normal and even desirable. Women's magazines rank females on their bodies, husbands, careers and outfits. Reality TV shows such as *The Bachelorette*, *Real Housewives* and *Next Top Model* franchises encourage women to believe that slapping down their sisters is the way to get ahead.

"That's the message we are constantly presented with," says Dr Rosewarne. "It doesn't make it true, but it does work to normalise female competitiveness."

And yet research shows, time and again, that women do indeed feel sabotaged by other women. Almost 90 per cent of the 3000-plus women surveyed for the 2010 book, *The Twisted Sisterhood*, frequently felt "currents of meanness and negativity emanating from other females" and almost 85 per cent of them had suffered "serious, life-altering knocks at the hands of other women". A study by the American Management Association revealed that 95 per cent of women felt undermined at some point in their careers by other women, while a British study found that two-thirds of women would prefer male bosses who are seen as more straight-

talking than "queen bees".

This is not to suggest that the female worker bees labouring for the queen bee are themselves as sweet as honey. In a trend

thick with irony, we love to bemoan the lack of women in power – almost as much as we love to tear down any woman who does manage to battle it to the top.

In her controversial new book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, argues that successful women suffer a "likeability penalty". "As women get more powerful, they ▶

**"IT WAS HURTFUL AND ILL-INFORMED."**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE HOLDEN. STYLING BY MATTIE CRONAN. HAIR BY BRAD MULLINS. MAKE-UP BY SARAH TAMMER. MODEL WEARS HUGO BOSS DRESS, DAVID LAWRENCE BELT AND CARRIES LONGCHAMP BAG AND APPLE IPAD. THIS IMAGE HAS BEEN RETOUCHE.

get less likeable,” she explains. “I see women holding themselves back because of this.”

World-renowned burns specialist Fiona Wood knows first-hand what Sheryl is on about, admitting recently that the people who have tried hardest to “noble” her in her life have been other women. And Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has hardly been supported by the sisterhood, which has attacked her on such critical grounds as the size of her bottom, her earlobes, her make-up and the unflattering jackets that look, according to feminist icon Germaine Greer, like they have come “from some kind of a stage hamper”.

This leads us to the obvious question: what drives this level of in-fighting? Sydney-based anthropologist Dr Stephen Juan, a fellow at the University of Sydney, explains that the female imperative, from ancient times, is to ensure offspring survival and to do this they need to be surrounded by a strong network of women. While both sexes are hard-wired to compete for limited resources (mates, food, etc), there is a striking difference in the pattern of aggression between men and women. Men tend to compete through direct aggression, which includes physical acts of violence, such as hitting, punching and kicking. Women, meanwhile, tend to exhibit pronounced social aggression aimed at excluding others from the all-important network, through acts of bitchiness, such as gossiping, ostracising and dismissing.

“Women use language much more effectively than men,” explains Dr Juan. “This makes them better nurturers, but it also makes them more effective at using words as a weapon to undermine rivals.”

Ten News anchor Sandra Sully says the first point of attack on a woman is still her appearance, then her fertility. Women such as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Westpac chief Gail Kelly are judged on their looks and grooming in a way that men in their position never are, while any reference to the huge success of Clinton’s predecessor Condoleezza Rice or Julia Gillard is inevitably followed up with a sneaky aside that they are childless.



**Jacinta Tynan (above) has been the target of bitchiness by women, as has Kerri-Anne Kennerley (right), who was “ropeable” with gossip columnist Annette Sharp (left).**

**“A LOT OF OTHERS RIPPED ME APART.”**

“We are still judging women against a 1950s paradigm – children, beauty, family – that doesn’t exist anymore,” Sandra says. “It’s very frustrating, especially when we don’t know the very personal circumstances of the women involved. We don’t know about their fertility, their husband’s fertility, their ex-partner’s fertility.”

“As a species, we have evolved, but if you look at kids in the schoolyard, you do see a difference between little girls and boys,” she adds. “Little girls can be so mean and, unfortunately, sometimes those nasty girls in the playground just don’t grow up.”

Dr Rosewarne, Jacinta, Sandra and Kerri-Anne are quick to point out that only a tiny minority of the thousands of women they have encountered have been saboteurs. The vast majority are supporters. Yet because they expect better of their sisters, this only makes the sniper attacks by other women, when they come, more soul-destroying. Kerri-Anne, who has never before publicly castigated her critics, admits to *The Weekly* that she



was “ropeable” when Annette Sharp, in a separate article, accused her (along with Kylie Minogue, Delta Goodrem and Network Seven personality Sally Obermeder) of using her cancer diagnosis as a PR opportunity. Annette was unable to respond by the time of going to press.

And Jacinta almost drowned in the tidal wave of animosity that crashed over her when she dared to write that she found first-time motherhood pleasurable. “I honestly thought it would remind other mothers of what a privilege motherhood is and that it might help mothers who were struggling,” she tells *The Weekly*. “Most women wrote to me saying the article had inspired them, but a lot of others ripped me apart on the internet. I had people wishing infertility upon me and others saying they hoped my baby would end up in hospital so that I would know what it was like to struggle.”

Jacinta calls such women the “Faceless Brave”. They post their vitriolic views about her appearance and opinion columns on the internet, without having the guts to attach their names or faces to the comments.

Dr Rosewarne agrees that the internet promotes behaviour that is unacceptable in ordinary society. In response to a recent article she wrote on the suicide of British nurse, Jacintha Saldanha, one anonymous reader wrote, “Oh, there is Lauren talking out of her arse again.” >



**Leigh Sales (left) and burns-specialist Fiona Wood (above) encourage women to be more supportive of each other.**

“That is the kind of comment someone might have thought privately five years ago,” Dr Rosewarne says. “But now you can say it instantly and very publicly, and by doing that, you can create the momentum for a feeding frenzy to ensue. All the things that the internet is great for – anonymity, accessibility, affordability – encourages behaviour that would not be tolerated in real life. You would not have a single friend if you spoke that way in real life.”

Nowhere is the cyber bile more acidic than on birthing, breastfeeding and other so-called mummy blogs. One friend wrote recently about her choice to give birth in a birthing centre, where instead of having her waters ruptured by staff to hurry things along, her body was left to do what was “normal”. This seemingly innocuous comment incited a venomous response from a former schoolfriend, “Define ‘normal’. I tell you what is not normal, sitting on baby forums all day and ranting about your birth because you believe it gives you some credibility as a person. Stop preaching and go interact with your kids.”

Leigh Sales, host of the ABC’s flagship current affairs program 7.30, agrees there is an “incredible amount of judgement” around new mothers from other women, over issues ranging from breastfeeding to child birth.

“I just wish everyone would go, ‘You know what, it’s none of my business what

anybody else does unless the child involved is being abused’,” she says. “Although there are morons out there who think bottle feeding is abuse, so even that standard is hard to apply.”

Author Kasey Edwards gave a hilarious, tongue-in-cheek account of the point scoring and competitiveness of new mothers in an article last year entitled, *I Am Not Being A Bitch But ...* “Yes, I had an epidural. Lose a point,” she wrote. “But I was determined to breastfeed. Gain one point. I have milk supply issues, so I’m sitting up all night on a breast pump stimulating supply. One more point for me. Did I mention being hospitalised with mastitis? If that doesn’t get me another point, I don’t know what does. But my daughter has a dummy. Ouch! Two point deduction.”

Yet the article also posed a serious question. “Why do we do it?”

Kasey asked. “I can’t speak for all women, but in my case, I think it’s all about inferiority. I feel unworthy, so I run down other women to make myself feel better. My internal logic works like this, ‘I’m rubbish, but at least I’m not as rubbish as her.’”

Psychologist Warren Cann, a director of the Raising Children Network, says the judgement, criticism and competition

among mothers is so fierce precisely because the stakes in parenting are so high.

“There is nothing more important than doing the right thing by your child and yet nobody knows what the outcomes of their [parenting] choices will be,” he explains. “We all worry about what our kids are going to say to the therapist one day and that level of uncertainty does not sit comfortably with us.

“The degree to which we feel like we are doing a good job as a parent is really a big part of our self-esteem. Many of us are plagued by doubts about whether we are a good enough parent. When you are feeling anxious, it’s natural to be defensive.” And the best method of defence is, as we all know, to attack.

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BACK IN MARCH, on the eve of International Women’s Day, Fiona Wood seized the opportunity to encourage women to be more supportive of each other and to avoid criticism that did not involve a solution. “Just take two seconds to think before you open your mouth,” she said. “Criticism is very valuable if it promotes robust debate. [But] before you criticise, think what gain is going to come out of that criticism and sometimes maybe you keep it in the think bubble instead of a speech bubble.”

Dr Rosewarne agrees that bitchiness for bitchiness’ sake is undermining our cause. While we can’t help the mean thoughts that spring into our minds from time to time, we should constantly strive to be kinder and more supportive of others. This, she argues, would put women further along the path to success and happiness.

“In his new book, *The Good Life: What Makes A Life Worth Living*, [social researcher] Hugh Mackay reveals that the key to happiness is

treating others the way we would like to be treated,” says Dr Rosewarne. “Is it really that hard?”

The answer to that question remains to be seen. Yet we had better start trying. As Madeleine Albright, the former US Secretary of State, once warned, “There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help one another.” ■

**“I THINK IT’S ALL ABOUT INFERIORITY.”**