

The **SISTER** ACT

It's the corporate stereotype – the ruthless alpha male. But is the real bullying going on among the women in the office? *Shelley Gare* reports.

A

A few months ago, I heard a horrible story. A young features editor had been working in a magazine office where one of the higher-ups had taken a dislike to her. The superior deliberately started excluding her colleague from the information loop. She organised office drinks or lunches but didn't include the young editor. Others would be invited with an admonishing shush: don't tell you-know-who. The young woman, whose desk was placed so that her back faced the office, used to sit at her computer and silently weep, thinking no one could see her. She sat there for another six months.

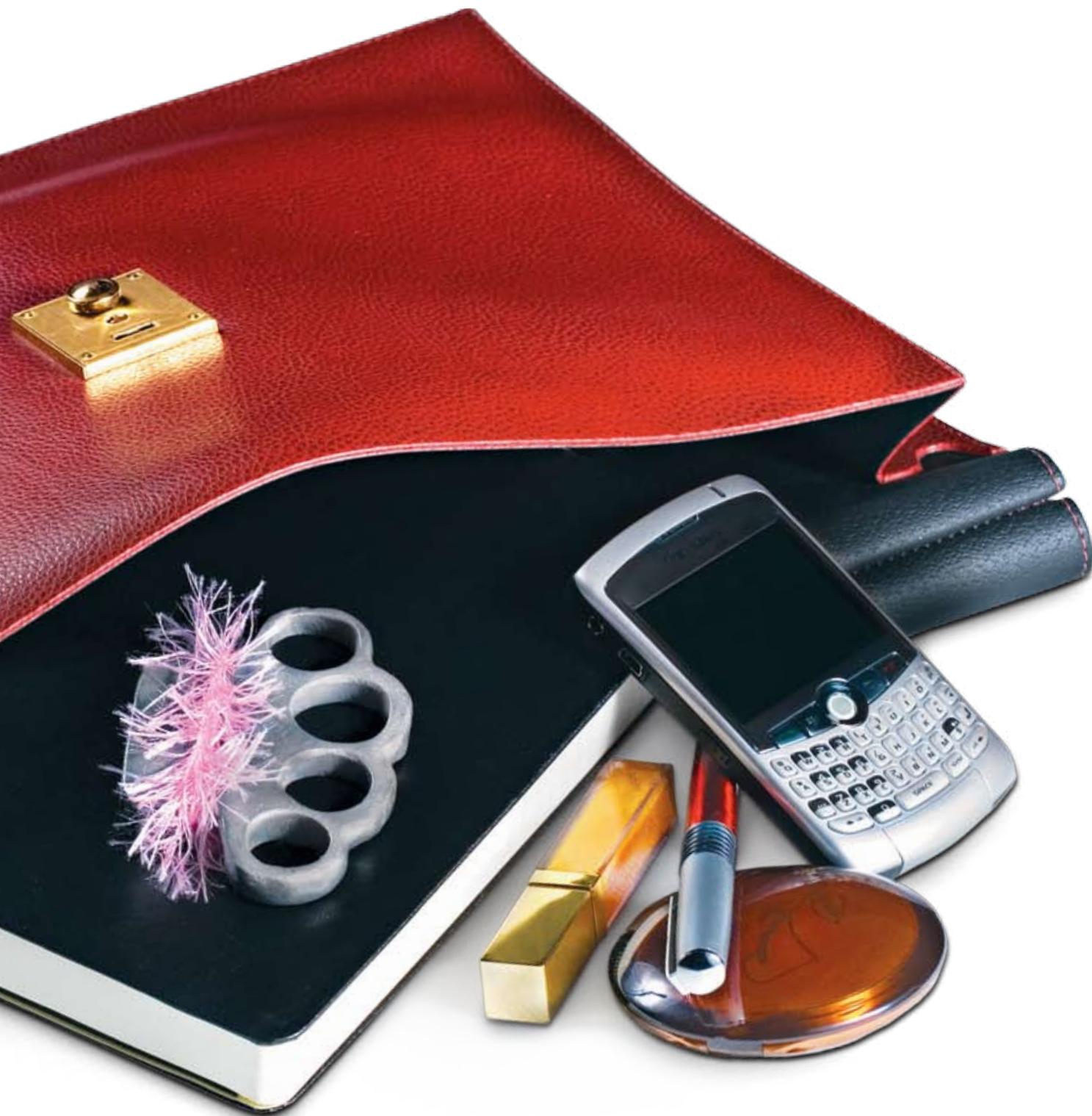
When I first heard this tale, I felt terribly sorry for this young woman. I was repelled by the cruelty and that it had happened in a workplace supposedly devoted to helping women enjoy being women. But there was also a tiny bit of me that thought ... well, she was an adult. It was a few women being immature, but she had her job. All she had to do was get through each weekday until 6pm and then she'd have her real life waiting for her at home. How hard could it have been?

FEW WOMEN CAN BE AS UPFRONT IN THEIR bullying of their sisters as Queen Elizabeth I of England. Faced with a younger, more beautiful rival, Mary Queen of Scots, who also had a claim to the throne of England, Elizabeth simply had her cousin's head chopped off. It was lethal. Direct.

By comparison, when adult women bully each other, they are mostly indirect. They use weapons that are hard to detect and that leave wounds invisible to the eye. The adjectives psychologists and bullying experts use to describe such shadowy methods are "covert", "subtle" and "manipulative". The tactics are ostracism, exclusion, spreading rumours and playing favourites. Information is withheld; secrets are kept; a victim's contributions – to either a conversation or a workplace – are ignored. It's bullying by stealth.

"Aggression in men tends to be worn much more clearly," says Dan Auerbach, a Sydney-based analytic psychotherapist. "But those subtle expressions of dislike between women make it much harder to fight back, and harder for other people to see what's going on."





Schoolyard bullying is, thankfully, finally out in the open; corporate bullying is now recognised; and the popularity of the 2004 film *Mean Girls*, inspired by the book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman, means we now know that teenage girls can have more in common with Conan the Destroyer than Bo Peep.

But talking about the kind of bullying that can go on between adult women turns out to be secret women's business, a no-go area, in spite of the fact that every woman to whom I spoke for this story knows it happens and knows how devastating it can be. It's the last great taboo, as Anthea Paul, author of the best-selling *Girlosophy* series, puts it. She says: "It's the one thing that every woman is aware of but they're scared to talk about. It is so traumatising when it happens to you, and it damages people emotionally and financially."

We're not talking federal Labor MP Belinda Neal here, with her alleged tirade at the staff of a Gosford restaurant and nightclub in mid-2008. Former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, and her delight in her nickname, was a little closer to

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the mark. "Sarah Barracuda ... she's proud of that name now, she uses it in her campaigns," Nick Carney, a former mentor and Wasilla city council member, told US online magazine Salon.com. "But she got that name from the way she conducted herself with her own teammates. She was vicious to the other girls, always playing up to the coach and pointing out when the other girls made mistakes."

But it was an article in the "news with shoes" title *Grazia* about the feud between actor Sienna Miller and supermodel Kate Moss that provided a picture of female bullying more awful and accurate: "Kate immediately took a dislike to Sienna ... She set about turning her whole Primrose Hill set against Sienna, effectively isolating the young actress from the ultimate A-list social gang. That hit Sienna badly because she had always craved Kate's friendship and approval." A source helpfully told *Grazia* how the gang "all laughed" at Miller.

This isn't the yelling, abuse or threats that we associate with corporate bullying as practised by both

ADAM KNOTT; JUSTICE AND POLICE MUSEUM, HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST

sexes, nor the punches and kicks of the schoolyard. And perhaps one reason it stays secret is because it's hard to talk about this bullying – how it's done, why it's done and who does it – without scrutinising the bigger picture: how women deal with each other and how they really feel about each other.

Says Pru Goward, former sex discrimination commissioner and now NSW Liberal MP: "I think [this bullying] is taken for granted by women ... It's just one of the pains in the butt of being a female, that we do this with each other. I never went to a forum where someone didn't get up at some stage and say, 'I wish women would pull together instead of pulling each other down.' And there would always be a titter of agreement through the room. And then somebody else would get up and wag their finger and say, 'That's the problem! You're always criticising women!' It is just pushed under the carpet. Women do not want to discuss it."

We're supposed to be the nice sex, the good and civilising gender. "We're taught from an early age to please," says ABC's Canberra newsreader Virginia Haussegger, whose 2005 book *Wonder Woman – The Myth of Having it All* still causes ructions. "And it's apparent that from a very young age we're taught to compete on a whole range of levels that we're not even aware of. Girls are taught to compete against other girls for parental favour, for friend favour, for teacher favour, in a way that boys aren't and don't. And as we grow, I don't think that ever drops off. Women are competing on their looks, on their ability to attract and hold the attention of others, to charm."

The women's movement, far from making it easier to let us be as openly horrid as we want to be, has only

"IN A HORROR FILM, IT'S THE CHARACTER WHO IS SMILING WHO INSPIRES REAL TERROR. TRUE HORROR IS WHEN PEOPLE CAN BEHAVE WITH SOCIAL ETIQUETTE WHILE DOING TERRIBLE THINGS."

put us in a new prison – what *Vanity Fair* writer Judy Bachrach once described as "the imposed bonhomie of modern feminism".

So, stuck with stereotypes that still – after all these years – label an ambitious man as aspirational and a competitive woman as a conniving bitch, too many women feel they must plaster their faces with smiles and coat their characters in sugar. But, as Auerbach says: "In a horror film, it's the character who is smiling who inspires real terror. True horror is when people can behave with social etiquette while doing terrible things."

WHEN I RELATE THE STORY THAT OPENS THIS piece to Melbourne bullying expert Evelyn Field, she is forthright. "That young woman should have investigated her options – she could have gone to a psychologist, a lawyer or her GP. She was definitely

being bullied." But that didn't happen and when I track the young woman down she is still reluctant to talk.

Another talented young editor, who was so undermined by two bullying superiors that her confidence was almost shattered by the experience, emails me to apologise. A lawyer can't talk because she has had to sign a confidentiality agreement. A fourth says that she can't speak out because her industry is too small, reprisals too ready. When I do find women prepared to speak at length, many anonymously, I am moved by how much the experience has affected them.

"I wouldn't go as far as saying I was suicidal but I was a nervous wreck," says media and events manager Niki Waldegrave, who ended up in hospital from stress fallout after what she says was a relentless daily diet of ostracism and game-playing. "Later on, someone told me it had been like watching a puppy get a kicking every day. But at the time you think you must be a failure."

Waldegrave was once one of the tough, glamorous 3am Girls on London's *Daily Mirror* writing daily gossip. When she later found herself on the receiving end of bullying she was knocked off her heels. "You get miserable and then that makes you insular, which makes you unsocial and then you think no one likes you. I'm naturally a nice, bubbly person, but you just feel like an idiot afterwards. Humiliated."

Sometimes, the tactics are so subtle that it can take a while for a woman to even understand she is being or has been bullied. "It's just hard to put your finger on what is happening," says one, "except you feel terrible."

Field, who like others says we can nearly all be bullies, all be victims, depending on environment and what's condoned – "most of us will be influenced

"People need to come here and relax.
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and go home and feel the same way."

Tasha Nadji, Traditional Owner, 7:03pm.

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by *where* we are, not *who* we are” – makes a strong point. “If you’re excluded – even though it’s subtle, passive, hard to detail – the impact is not just stressful; it can be traumatic.”

Jane Radcliffe*, a philosophy lecturer, remembers a department head who cut her off from information she needed to do a committee job properly. “She would regularly enjoy my humiliation in front of a board of mainly men as I was grilled about matters I was responsible for, information that she had to hand but had neglected to pass on. I slowly realised she’d also failed to inform me about so many entitlements as a newly arrived academic ... including financial grants. Indeed, I had no office when I arrived for several weeks. I was told that students were currently using it and they’d be out of it soon enough. Apparently, my station was below that of a student.”

Like many, she thought that bullying had to be something visible, audible, noisy. She came slowly to a conclusion about her own experience: “It’s not bullying in any conventional sense – but it has a similar effect. I was demeaned, kept wrong-footed and nervous about what was coming next. I realised what was happening but didn’t know how to counter it.”

Several women expressed shame, and anger with themselves that they hadn’t listened to their intuition, and that their desire to be professional – to be the good girl – got in the way instead.

Alice Lindsay*, a business consultant, still hasn’t recovered from her year of being bullied by a superior whose favourite tactic was to leave her out of the information loop and pit her against another colleague. “I cried every morning as I was driving to work. I lost 6kg. I still feel really bad about it. Was it something

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about me? Part of it is that you think you should have been able to cope better so you’re disappointed in yourself ... It’s very isolating. You expect that people will be compassionate so you almost disbelieve what’s happening. You think: this person *can’t* be this awful.”

Former business news television reporter Helen McCombie, who is now working as a corporate communications consultant, refers to one company where she once worked as “the torturers”. “People don’t really believe how terrible it is. I was upset, on the verge of tears. I felt powerless ... It’s impossible to fight back, too. If you do, you’re the one who gets labelled as not fitting in. The only thing you can do is leave.”

More than two decades after it happened, Ann Burleigh, a highly capable and successful professional in the healthcare sector, can remember in detail how she was targeted by a superior. Again, it involved the elaborate anti-etiquette of exclusion. In one instance,

Burleigh was heading a small group of medical experts conducting a procedure that could have been life-threatening. Suddenly, she was pulled out of the group and relegated to a menial task. “It wasn’t until I was driving home that I suddenly found myself furious, absolutely furious, to think that I, as an adult woman, had been put in the situation where I was so demeaned.” She is surprised to discover how readily she recalls the searing burn of that decades-old fury.

Science helps explain why women can be so unnerved. A 2001 paper about gender differences from the National Institute on Aging in Baltimore, Maryland, cites research showing that women can decode non-verbal signals of emotion better than men. Conceivably then, a woman can read the hostility in another’s behaviour, voice and face and feel uneasy or “got at” while those around her, especially men, remain none the wiser.

It’s another horror film plot: the heroine pounding her hands against the window of a cafe while the people inside remain engrossed in their croissants.

OSTRACISM IS AN ODD WORD WITH AN ODD history. It comes from the Greek word *ostrakon*, which means tile or shard of pottery. In ancient Athens, the citizens would use tiles to write down the names of other citizens who were believed to be dangerous to the state. If a name was written down too many times, its owner would be temporarily exiled.

Therapists and experts on bullying say ostracism is the main method adult women use to bully other women. It is astonishingly effective. Again, science explains why. US psychologist and academic Kipling Williams, now at Purdue University in Indiana, is one



of the world's leading experts on rejection. In 2004, he described a simple frisbee-throwing experience on the ABC's *Catalyst* program. He had been in a park with his dog when suddenly a Frisbee hit him on the back of his neck. He chucked it back to the two guys who were playing with it and they threw it back to him. "So then I threw it to them and they threw it to me so I sort of joined their group ... Then all of a sudden, they stopped throwing to me and they just threw it to each other ... And I was amazed at how bad I felt so quickly and I also felt really quite awkward and finally I just sort of slithered back to my dog and if it weren't for the fact that I was a social psychologist and ... I could use this in the lab, I think I would have felt worse still."

The experience allowed Williams to develop a series of experiments on computer to explore how rejection made people feel – and how quickly it had an effect. He and fellow researchers Naomi Eisenberger and Matt Lieberman then ended up with a map of the rejected brain. They discovered that the same part of the brain that's triggered by the distress of physical

short piece for *The Age* in which she argued that feminism had been purposely misrepresented by conservatives using the old extreme caricature of the "man-hating, hairy-legged, lesbian" to scare women away from the cause. In about a flicker of an eye she was attacked by a blogging scrum of self-declared hairy-legged feminists. The bloggers wanted her to know that they were damned happy to fit that picture. An initial post – "I have hairy armpits ... I'm fat ... My breasts sag ..." drew another 147 responses in what one later sympathetic blogger in the thread accurately described as a "piling-on".

Dux admits with self-deprecatory laughter that she found herself as upset and hurt by the fury and flurry as a 16-year-old schoolgirl being thrown out of class. "I've been attacked in blogs before, mostly by men, and I've always found it a bit amusing, but this was different because the bloggers were women and feminists."

What's striking to an outsider reading the thread, though, is the virulence of the mostly anonymous posts – and that there are so many of them. Dux says, "They

In 1960, US journalist Helen Lawrenson wrote a piece for *Esquire* magazine titled "How women feel about other women". She cut to the chase in her opening paragraph: "The ambivalent nature of women's attitude toward other members of their sex has always been a source of bafflement and derision to men and of denials and camouflage on the part of women."

In the last few years, there has been a trickle of books that lift the lid. One of the best is *Tripping the Prom Queen – The Truth About Women and Rivalry* by Susan Shapiro Barash. She discovered two things: "By and large, women compete primarily with each other ... [and] female competition tends to be total, extending to every detail of a woman's life." Men's contests are goal-oriented, specific, she argues. Women's competition is about their identities. Barash wrote: "We're still willing to cut each other's throats over what we value most – jobs, men, and social approval."

She also found that: "To many of my subjects, women's rivalry seemed like a dirty little secret, and they were afraid of how they might look if they were honest about it." But, she adds elsewhere, "ignoring these emotions only makes them more powerful".

It seems to have been easier 70 years ago to acknowledge, in public at least, that women aren't produced at a Hallmark card factory.

In the '30s, New York playwright Clare Boothe Luce wrote a brutally funny satire, *The Women*, that wickedly depicted the sly bullying, gossiping and unkindnesses that went on among high-society dames in Manhattan. It was a smash hit, first as a play, then as a film. A line given to the film's lead bully, socialite Sylvia Fowler, says it all: "Oh, you remember the awful things they said about what's-her-name before she jumped out the window? There. You see? I can't even remember her name so who cares?"

A remake of the film was released last year, starring most of Hollywood's heavyweight women actors – Meg Ryan, Candice Bergen, Annette Bening, Cloris Leachman. But this time we got a script that, confoundingly, turned the women into a bunch of unconvincing, simpering, saccharine ninnies mouthing sisterhood platitudes. The only female we were permitted to view saying a truly cutting line to another woman was an 11-year-old girl.

THERE ARE SOCIAL REASONS, MAYBE REASONS OF survival, too, for all this covering up. Dan Auerbach talks about an important difference – in terms of societal norms – between men and women. He makes it clear he's speaking in very general terms and that it's a classical view but ... he takes a deep breath: "Men tend to think they are entitled to be direct, to go towards what attracts them. In traditional western culture, we've become accustomed to women's power being based in *attracting* attention towards them rather than actively pursuing an interest, and so women might not feel as entitled to be as direct about what they want. They may have to find roundabout ways to disguise their interest."

He also says: "What we comfortably see as assertive in men, we may label as aggressive in a woman. With these norms in mind, a woman's sense of shame may kick in at a lower threshold of assertiveness than it would in a man."

Virginia Haussegger mentions Malcolm Turnbull's admission on ABC-TV's *Q&A* program last September that there was no love lost between he and Peter Costello. "Men can say unpopular things about another man and get away with it. The moment women do that, they're really ostracised," she says. "It's interesting that in politics, it's assumed that women will work together, that they will be the cohesive, nurturing, inclusive elements in a political



pain is also activated by rejection. Ostracism may literally be felt as pain.

Cassie Govan, now an associate director at Sweeney Research in Melbourne, did her psychology PhD with Williams when he was a professor at Macquarie University. "The experience of rejection seems to be hard-wired into us," she says. "Even if you're taking part in an experiment programmed by a computer, you will respond as if it were a human being doing the rejecting. Men can be just as painfully affected by ostracism; it's just much more likely for a woman to use the cold-shoulder treatment than to yell or punch. But ostracism is still aggression."

"The way to hurt a woman is to cut her off from her network, to isolate her," says *GirlForce* series author Nikki Goldstein, whose latest book, *GirlForce Friends*, teaches teenage girls to cope with the intricacies and cruelties in their friendships. Auerbach agrees: "Traditionally, women pride themselves on their relationships so the most potent weapon a woman can use against another is exclusion."

Several months ago, Monica Dux, who co-authored with Zora Simic *The Great Feminist Denial*, wrote a

were hiding behind their sense of self-righteousness as women. And they went ballistic when I implied they were bullies."

Where does such annihilating hostility come from? Dux wonders if it's because women aren't given the outlets for aggression that men get. "I played netball as a kid but it's so repressive. It's extremely aggressive – but you're not allowed to make contact. I think that's why we create other ways to be aggressive because outright aggression is still aberrant in a woman.

"I'd actually like to have the odd wrestle," she adds, only half-jokingly.

LITERATURE IS FULL OF EXAMPLES OF WOMEN'S meanness towards other women, from the Marquise de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* to Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*. In Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, city girl and new bride Carol Kennicott is cut down to size by the Gopher Prairie townswomen. She is humiliated when she discovers they have been laughing at her behind her back. "And these women are to be my arbiters, the rest of my life!" she thinks in desperation.

debate. They're not allowed to act independently. If they do, they get thrashed."

So is there a process of natural selection going on here? Are women who act in more indirect ways seen to be more desirable, which means the gene responsible is more likely to be passed on? Or at least, are women who act covertly more successful in today's society than their more direct sisters? If so, and if it's a result of behaviour being determined by what's agreeable to men, then nothing seems likely to change soon, given the surprise findings in a recent paper on differences between the sexes by an international research team. Apparently, the more prosperous, egalitarian and healthy a society is, the more we seem to live up to the man/woman stereotypes made famous in John Gray's *Mars and Venus* books.

"The gap between the personality traits of men and that of women widens as the society in which they live becomes more modern, economically affluent and gender egalitarian," the research team wrote in its 2008 paper "Why can't a man be more like a woman?"



Mean girls on film: Keira Knightley as the disempowered Georgiana trapped in a brutal marriage in *The Duchess*; Annette Bening and Debra Messing in last year's timid remake of the biting funny 1930s satire *The Women*.

published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in the US. The argument is that in traditional cultures that tend to be poor and agrarian, the men are more stressed by hardship, and so are more cautious, less assertive. In developed countries, men are less constrained, freer to be assertive.

There is an exquisitely painful scene in the Keira Knightley film *The Duchess* that will pummel the solar plexus of any woman watching even if we now live in the 21st century and the film is set in the late 18th. *The Duchess* tells the story of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and her brutal marriage. The duke, played by Ralph Fiennes, utters several memorable one-liners about power and the roles of women throughout. At one stage, as his wife pleads for a chance for her own life, offering him what she thinks is a reasonable compromise, the duke hears her out incomprehendingly, as if he were listening to an otter asking for an invitation to dinner. "I don't do deals," he says finally, his lip lifting. "I'm in charge."

How often do women still stub their toe – or break their heart – on that truth?

I discovered a new word recently. It's *stutenbissig*

and it was the senior vice-president for global marketing at the German-based printing company Heidelberg, Adriana Nuneva, who introduced it to my vocabulary. I had been invited to give a series of talks about women in male-dominated workplaces and in my conclusion I talked about the way men respected each other but women too often didn't. Nuneva explained that in German, *stutenbissig* literally describes the way female horses snap at each other, but now it's used to mean the way women "bite" each other maliciously.

We agreed that we needed to be less *stutenbissig* in our lives. Perhaps that would be possible if we had more respect for each other.

I once wrote in a column, "There is a steely realism to the friendships and working relationships between men that goes missing between women. It is what bolsters men as a sex and the lack of it is what can bring women down."

Lawrenson, in her seminal essay of the '60s, coolly wrote of women's complex feelings towards each other: "Arcane and unadmitted though many of



these resentments may be, they find expression in the prickly conduct of feminine relationships, and few women are completely immune to them."

For her pains, Lawrenson, one of the funniest and sharpest writers of her generation, and a woman who once wrote mischievously – at a time of militant feminism – that she rather liked ironing and folding, has been virtually written out of the history of American journalism.

Perhaps we'll keep being *stutenbissig* – and secret female bullies will continue to prosper – until women can happily and fearlessly blow the whistle on all of it. ☺

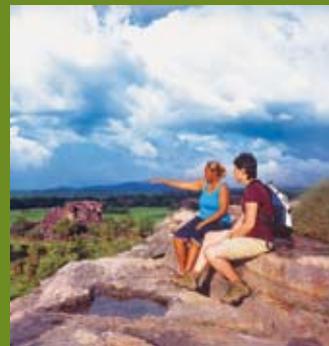
* Not their real names.

Shelley Gare's previous story for the magazine was "Strings attached" (November 8-9, 2008), about vocal group Human Nature's collaboration with the Sydney Symphony orchestra.

Resources: Associated Counsellors & Psychologists Sydney (Sydney & Central Coast locations), www.counsellingsydney.com.au, 0416 041 699; Relationships Australia, www.relationships.net.au, 1300 364 277; Evelyn Field at www.bullying.com.au, (03) 9523 0300.

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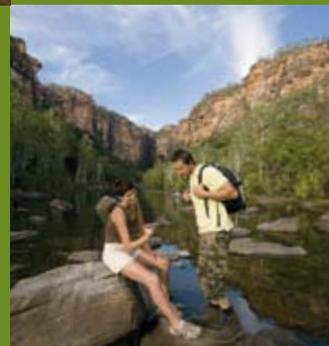
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