

It's time to be honest with ourselves this International Women's Day

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Perceptions about women have come a long way in the last half a century – and it's something you can see very clearly in the media industry. Last International Women's Day, Budweiser took the opportunity to amend some very outdated adverts from their past.

One Budweiser ad from the 1950s originally displayed an exasperated woman, with the subtitle "she found she married two men." The poster was sympathising with the great struggles women faced when cooking for their husbands and their troublesome "inner men".

For 2019, [the ad was reimaged](#) to feature the same woman drinking with her friends – with much more empowering line "she found she has it all." It's a potent emblem of change.

But should having it all really be the tagline for women today?

Each International Women's Day, we take the opportunity to shout about the outstanding, inspirational and high-achieving women in business. And they deserve it. Years of hard work, commitment and drive has meant they have risen to the top, taken the big jobs and smashed through that glass ceiling. But what remains an unspoken part of the picture is the sacrifice that it most likely took to get there.

Many women are told that we can "have it all": the job, the family, the social life. And many of the women who have "made it" say they have done just this. But spending so much of the conversation focusing how we can all be superwoman is detrimental – not only to the fight for equality, but also to our mental health, wellbeing and general satisfaction in our professional lives.

So, where do the issues really lie for women who are navigating the workplace and what it means to succeed at their job? And what needs to be done to change the current culture, so that we can achieve true equality?

From Wonder Woman to the real world

Let's start with the realities of being a senior woman – or man – in any business. In all honesty, it's a difficult, often competitive or defensive position to be in. You need to be at the top of your game all of the time. For women, this is particularly acute because, for so long, we were rarities and we were deemed lucky to be given the opportunity – as opposed to the business being lucky to have a great leader, whatever their gender.

This has led to some dishonesty, or perhaps rose-tinted messages, from senior women. When attending networking events, speaking on panels, or coaching or mentoring others, many haven't felt comfortable being honest about the challenges they're faced, and still face today. Instead the focus was on positive encouragement – which is no bad thing. But if we're going to really solve the gender equality issue in business, it needs authenticity and conviction.

My journey had its own challenges...

A twentieth century problem

The unequal playing field that women face in business certainly isn't new; it's an issue with its roots far back in the twentieth century. There has doubtless been progress in these areas. But the evidence is clear that women continue to face a whole host of hurdles, that often make their career progression more complex than men's.

Maternity leave has a significant and lasting impact on women's careers, with only 28% of women in full-time careers three years after childbirth, [compared to 90% of men](#). Equally, women are [more likely to take on caring roles than men](#) in their later life, whether for elderly parents, children or other relatives.

Women earn less than men throughout their careers, with the [pay gap at its largest in their 50s](#). And throughout their working lives, women are less comfortable acknowledging and sharing their own achievements – which in turn means they are likely to fall behind [more vocal colleagues](#).

These challenges reflect society and culture, as well as the business world – and there isn't a simple fix. It's also important to acknowledge that every woman's circumstances and career are unique. But we have to be honest about the complexities that women face, so that we can take steps to address them together.

Tackling the superwoman myth

So how can we bring about greater honesty and cultural change? First, we need to encourage more openness from women at all levels in the business: not only about the opportunities open to them but the challenges faced in getting there. That means having safe and open forums, where women can share their experiences and genuinely support each other without being concerned about negative repercussions for their careers.

As organisations, we also need to look at the pinch points where women's careers can run into difficulties – and create policies that will ease the way. For example, men should be offered paternity leave on terms that are more equitable with women and encouraged to take it. Equally, if we work hard to tackle the gender pay gap, it won't always be more attractive for women – rather than men – to be the primary care giver.

But there has to be an individual element too. As women, we need to be kinder to ourselves and acknowledge that “having it all” is an incredibly difficult standard to hold yourself to. When you're facing challenges, think about what you would say to your best friend – and never think that because you're not superwoman, you're not succeeding.

The concept of “having it all” isn't helpful, for women or the fight for fairness. After all, when was one person “doing it all” considered true equality? We owe it to ourselves, and the next generation of women, to be honest. Things are still hard – and it's only by being open that we can help to make them better.

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