

The 10 Worst Stereotypes About Powerful Women

“I’ve been in this field for more than 30 years,” said co-anchor of *Today* Ann Curry. “I’ve heard a lot of stereotypes.”

Women continue climbing the rungs of power—building their ranks as heads of state, corporate leaders and media influencers—but their minority status means they still face harsh, limiting assessments based on their gender. “Women are being judged more, even by other women,” said Valerie Young, Ed.D., author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*. While male leaders are allowed to have complex personalities, powerful women are often summed up by hackneyed stereotypes that undermine them and their power.

ForbesWoman tracked down many of the world’s most powerful women, from IMF chief Christine Lagarde to Jill Abramson of the *New York Times*, to ask: *What is your least favorite stereotype about powerful women?* Gender and career experts also weighed in on the dangerous notions about female success and how they seep into the collective subconscious. The following represent the 10 most hated and pervasive stereotypes.

No. 1: Ice Queen

Halley Bock, CEO of leadership and development training company Fierce, notes that the ruthless “ice queen” stereotype is rampant. Cultural depictions, like frigid magazine editor Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (and her real-world counterpart Anna Wintour of *Vogue*) and back-stabbing boss Patty Hewes on *Damages*, paint successful women as unsympathetic power-mongers. It is, of course, a Catch-22. “A woman who shows emotion in the workplace is often cast as too fragile or unstable to lead,” Bock said. “A woman who shows no emotion and keeps it *hyper*-professional is icy and unfeminine. For many women, it can be a no-win situation.”



No. 2: Single and Lonely



Harvard lecturer Olivia Fox Cabane notes that the strong perception that powerful women are intimidating to men and will need to sacrifice their personal lives may stop women from going after power. Even those women who aren’t interested in marrying, face harsh judgments. Men get to be “bachelors” while women are reduced to “spinsters” and “old-maids.” In fact, when Janet Napolitano was nominated Secretary of Homeland Security, critics said her being single would allow her to “spend more time on the job.”

No. 3: Tough

The first female Executive Editor of *The New York Times*, Jill Abramson is anything but stereotypical. She had a hard-charging career as an investigative reporter at *The Wall Street Journal* and edited her way to the top of the *Times* masthead. She's also a true-blood New Yorker and is writing a book about puppies. Despite her complexities, she must contend with being called "tough" and "brusque," making the "she's-tough stereotype" her least favorite. Said Abramson: "As an investigative reporter, I had tough standards and a formidable way of framing and reporting stories, but I don't think of myself as a tough person."



No. 4: Weak

Costa Rica President Laura Chinchilla, the country's first female leader, told me that successful women face typecasting largely because society is still adjusting to women's recent decision-making power. Chinchilla believes the most pervasive stereotype is that women are "weak," a perception that may stem from women's greater desire to build a consensus. "We understand success not as the result of just one person but as the result of a team," she said. "[It's a] different way of dealing with power [that] is misunderstood as a kind of weakness."

No. 5: Masculine

The notion that powerful women must be, lead and look like a man really aggravates Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund. In a video interview with FORBES she said—pumping her fist—she hates the idea that "you have to look like a businessman." She admitted she sometimes feels the pressure to look the "right" way, but tries to resist not being "overly businesslike."



No. 6: Conniving



When NBC's Curry first started her career, she was told she couldn't be a news reporter because women had "no news judgment." Now, she's at the top of her game and says the stereotype that most offends her is "the idea that a woman can only be successful because she somehow connived or engineered her rise—that she could not rise simply because she was too good to be denied." She has experienced it herself, saying that she gets asked if she "forced" NBC to give her the anchor job or if there was a "backroom deal." Curry told me, "I find it really annoying."

No. 7: Emotional

Ellen Lubin-Sherman, executive coach and author of business guide *The Essentials of Fabulous*, believes one the most dangerous stereotypes female leaders will face is that they are prone to emotional outbursts. Despite Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's

consistent cool-headed demeanor, when she teared up on the campaign trail, the media pounced. Similarly, former Yahoo Chief Carol Bartz is frequently cited for her “salty language,” which has been used as evidence that she is “emotional” and a “loose cannon.”

No. 8: Angry

“Anger is a sign of status in men, but when women show anger they are viewed as less competent,” said Young. First Lady Michelle Obama was condemned as an “angry black woman” when she was campaigning for her husband in the 2008 presidential election. The Harvard-trained lawyer conscientiously softened her image and speeches in order to be more “likable,” becoming better known for her fashion and her unending support of her husband than for her stance on political issues.



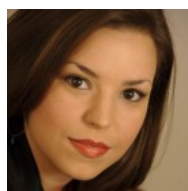
No. 9: A Token

Women hold just 16% of corporate board seats. But instead of focusing on balancing things out, they are often devalued as being a “token” of diversity rather than having earned the post. Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was often the only woman in the room, but her gender didn’t get her there. “While companies take their diversity goals seriously, they are not going to settle for less than the best person for the job,” said Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA career center at Northeastern University. “Women are hired because of their education and experience and what they can do for the company.”



No. 10: A Cheerleader

Billie Blair, president and CEO of Change Strategists, notes that prominent women who are considered feminine and warm may be dismissed as “cheerleaders” rather than the strong *leaders* that they are. When former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was running for VP, Blair was amazed to hear a male client describe her as “a cheerleader, not a coach nor a quarterback.”



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