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AS GOOD AS IT GETS?

MORE WOMEN ARE GETTING AHEAD IN BUSINESS, BUT THERE'S STILL A LONG WAY TO BEFORE WE SEE FULL EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE. KATE WILDBLOOD TALKS TO SIX SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONALS ABOUT HOW THEY GOT WHERE THEY ARE TODAY AND WHAT THEY THINK REMAINS TO BE DONE IN THE FIGHT FOR RIGHTS

Take six women at the top of their game and ask them how it's been for them. Not so much a makeover as a made it. I won't combine their ages to help you get an idea of the wisdom they have – they'd never speak to me again – but you get my drift. I went wandering through the minds of a lesbian bar/club owner, BBC production executive, exotic service provider, erotic dancer and club promoter, journalist/writer, and a erotic emporium founder to see how they see how the cookie crumbles for women today – and if any of them will admit to burning it.



JANE BENTHAM

Just how have these professional, 21st century women fared in their preferred fields? Are we women moving forward? **Jane Bentham** is a documentaries and contemporary factual executive producer for the BBC. She's one of those responsible for *Trinny & Susanna*. How has it been in her fair White City? "When I joined the documentaries department in the early 90s, the executives were predominantly male," she says. "The role that I do is predominantly female. (perhaps because skills required are stereotypically female traits – emotional intelligence, people skills, planning etc). Overall, though, there has been a measurable rise in the number of women reaching senior positions. We now have had over recent years two female controllers in **Jane Root** at BBC2 and **Lorraine Heggessey** at BBC1. I would say the BBC has about 50% women in the senior commissioning/television positions, which is all very positive."

Rebecca Drury, erotic dance teacher and promoter of club night **Sirens**, has also witnessed the changes. The glass ceiling in her world is bejewelled, if even in existence. "Could you imagine being able to teach ladies how to pole dance/lap dance even as little as four years ago?" She says, "The trend of seeing that kind of thing as sleazy and belonging to the realms of strip clubs is well and truly over. No longer is it purely the domain of men in overcoats. Women love to see ladies pole dance. Ladies from all walks of life come to me for classes. I've been running the school for three years and have taught doctors, businesswomen, yummy mummies and women with confidence problems. Ten years ago my company would have been dismissed outright as degrading and insulting."



REBECCA DRURY

"We were pretty much the only women (who kept their clothes on!) in the incredibly male dominated world of the 'sex industry' and were viewed as a bit of a novelty, but they sure take us seriously now!" **Ky, Sh!**



Ky

Also doing the erotic world proud is **Sh!** founder and agony aunt supreme **Ky**. You could say if anyone has pushed the right buttons it's been her. "When Sh! opened in early 1992 it was precisely because there was no place for women to shop for sex toys in an honest, relaxed, non-intimidating and non-judgmental atmosphere, so we're still doing exactly what we set out to do over 13 years ago. We were pretty much the only women (who kept their clothes on!) in the incredibly male dominated world of the 'sex industry' and were viewed as a bit of a novelty, but they sure take us seriously now."

Slightly less exotic is the life of a professional hack. But that hasn't stopped women becoming journalists in their typing and shorthand droves. **Claire Hughes**, of *Attitude*, *DJ Magazine* and many Sunday supplements, has seen some changes in her male dominated world. Just. "Journalism was very male dominated in the 80s but I think this has got progressively better since the demise of the Fleet Street mafia," she says. "Music journalism is an exception and the male-female ratio is weighted down heavily on the boys' side. This hasn't changed since the early 90s but if you're determined and you know your stuff, doors will always open."

"Journalism was very male dominated in the 80s but I think this has got progressively better since the demise of the Fleet Street mafia," **Claire Hughes**

And then there's **Letitia**. A self-professed erotic service provider, comforter of men and intimacy facilitator who's also written a damn fine book. How's it been in her world? "The profession has pretty much remained the same, ie a covert, beleaguered demi mode and mysterious netherworld which few have an inkling of," she says. "The law for prostitution for the most part remains the same – it is still and has always been legal. The illegality lies with age, pimping, controlling or kerb/street crawling." **Letitia**



"I see it every day in my Candy Bar customers. Young, full of confidence, no coming-out drama. Just ready to take on the world." Kim Lucas

Kim Lucas does see the girl power mark though. "I see it every day in my Candy Bar customers. Young, full of confidence, no coming-out drama. Just ready to take on the world."

Jane Bentham agrees. "Girl power does exist. Women are in positions of power, they know their strengths and they're organising terms to their own benefit and to that of other women."

Ky of Sh! also sees it out there and proud. And occasionally battery-operated. "Girl power sure does exist. More than ever before women own the means to their own pleasure now – financially, socially, maternally, sexually or whatever – rather than having to live with our pleasure being seen as secondary. It's more the self-esteem and confidence this brings us that gives us 'girl power' than the extra bucks in our purse or the ability to sit in a pub alone."

So we have our Grrr! power. We're sorted for the continuing role-smashing, stereotype-free, equally paid revolution. The question is do we, if we did in the first place, need to burn our bras again?

Bentham from the BBC reports. "I always loved my plunge bra and lipstick, and would never have abandoned either. I'm proud to say I was a feminist of the 80s, living a separatist lifestyle and embracing lesbian politics. I often think how lovely it would be to be gay in your teens today and not have to worry about length of hair, make-up or femininity."

She adds, "How far we have come with the gorgeous hedonistic world of *The L Word*? Gay women and women generally seem more complacent and less politicised now, though. We should do more".

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same – it is still and has always been legal. The illegality lies with age, pimping, controlling or kerb/street crawling. Though you wouldn't think so to read the newspapers. There are always the same comments made by newspapers about little old ladies who are (wrongly) sent to jail for withholding council tax and it's always reported that 'she's locked up with burglars, muggers and prostitutes'. The erroneous party line that is predictably trotted out and is so freaking misleading. Which, in turn, sends out the wrong message – the message that we are somehow felons who are flouting the law and cannot be trusted."

So there we are. Victorian values rubbing up against equality commissions, glass ceilings and girl power. Oh yes. Girl power. The much-maligned catchphrase of the late 90s that comes back to haunt us and says a lot about where we are today. More Grrr! than Girl, young women today seem to know what they really (really) want.



The **Candy Bar's Kim Lucas** marvels at the power of today's female youth. "I've just finished reading **Marilyn French's** *The Women's Room* 25 years after it was first written and I felt that things certainly have got better for women since then. In our society at least, women are treated a lot more equally than they were when *The Women's Room* was written."

So does that much-maligned phrase 'girl power' still exist today? Claire Hughes gets

out her vital statistics. "It's been clinically proven that women are 16 times more powerful than men, so, in that respect, yes. If you're talking about the Spice Girls, though, Sporty is apparently digging her heels in so it doesn't look like they'll be making their mark on the 21st century."

Rebecca Drury has her own take on the bra burning. "I've never felt the need to assert my feminist views. I'm 38 and therefore have been brought up to view myself as equal to anyone as the norm. If anyone challenges my right to live as a human being I wish them well and hope they find wisdom."

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breaks to white middle-class men. And as for the women of the world, the story is far from over."

So the politicising of an undergarment still resonates. For some. Letitia and her granny see it slightly differently. "Burn my bra?? Ha! I didn't put one on until my 40th birthday. All that attention and massaging led me to have more front than Harrods! I don't think we have to resort to these stunts to make progress." Letitia continues, "It will all come out in the wash, as my granny used to say. We can do it by stealth, persistence and great colour lippy!"

So there you have it – six women's take on underwear and all that it holds. That'll be us women. The ones gay, straight, bi or trans who, through sheer determination, a little gloss, plenty of grit and, in some cases, some mighty underwiring, have kicked their way out of the underclass. And they're still kicking. Silicone implant burning anyone?