

Women Empowerment: The Last Single Girl

Valerie Naidoo

When I think about the men I dated in my 20s, compared to the men I date in my 30's; I'm glad that I didn't get married back then! Women are dictating the pace of dating and with many prioritizing their careers over personal/social commitments – the white fairy tale wedding is becoming more of an illusion. Having said this; carving out a high profile career and owning the lifestyle versus finding the one and racing against the fertility clock looms largely in the background for many – I am not alone in this.

I am a 4th generation South African Indian; conditioned to act and think British. Due to spending the better part of my twenties and early thirties in the UK and a few other countries, I have learnt to relate to the multi-dimensional first world mindset. In trying to explain my views on the fruit of devoting myself to a life of service as opposed to raising kids, some people either give me the sympathetic or bordering on insanity look. I hear from some concerned folk about my rapidly closing reproductive window and that the older we become our market value drops through the floor. The veil of fear did fall initially when all of my girlfriends, whom I've spent the last decade with – lamenting over finding "*the one*", have now been married off and I remain the last single girl! So what's a girl to do?

For women who are well into their thirties, it's no longer a money issue – you have the option to own your time and lifestyle. I've experienced a circle of hell in trying to explain my reasons for not opting for an early marriage and how the need to live independently has forever beckoned me. Not marrying early and not having kids – does this mean that I'm unhappy, that I've not reached a desired state and that I'm unhealthy and miserable? We seem to be ruled by certain levels of controversy. Women are conditioned to aspire towards marriage with ideals of a forever after happy ending, but men are not conditioned to think this way.

Should ego and pride permit us to remain in lukewarm relationships? I feel that a fear to go against social grains, often leave some individuals punctuated with uncertainty. The femosphere is encouraged to be ambitious, but we should not be overly ambitious, we can be outspoken but not too outspoken, we need to shrink on certain levels – otherwise we will intimidate the opposite sex. Females are often far too harshly judged; for not marrying at an early age, for getting divorced, for marrying men far too older or younger than us or even for not being able to bear children.

Similarly, the social prescription that men hold women back professionally has boldly ruled the workplace for a very long time; fortunately, this norm is declining in value. On the contrary, men fear the power of women and women often lack the confidence to embrace their power. As females, some of us want

liberation, power and equality but also have a preference towards chivalry – this tends to confuse the men around us. I've come to realise that men also suffer from gender biases; women are not alone in this inequality. Neither men nor women can be blamed – these are the repercussions of adhering to centuries of unchallenged and misunderstood social conditioning. We live in a society governed by social norms that tend to define thinking patterns and choices.

I believe society has conditioned men to fear women; women misunderstand and misuse their power – I feel that the reprogram buttons need to be reset for both genders. Women and men need development programs and tools, because the unconscious bias definitely exists for both genders. Inherited gender norms and social conditioning needs to be unlearned and reinventing our mindsets will help move away from outdated social conventions.

I don't think there is ever a right or wrong time to marry and finding "*the one*" should not be dictated at the pace of the media or society. Women; married or single, deserve to have the level of happiness they desire! I celebrate my life because I have found the courage to cross a few big chasms, to stand up to tradition while addressing key social barriers, and I'm comfortable in my skin. I have dared to stand out in my journey personally and professionally by not adhering to out-of-date social prescriptions while pursuing my passions and have indeed become a celebrated last single girl.