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"Legal Regals"

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The Myth of the "Queen Bee" Syndrome

What's all this I'm reading about a so-called generation gap between women lawyers? It seems that every month or so, somebody purports to expose the rift between younger women lawyers and their more senior counterparts.

A weekly news magazine and a national legal publication both wrote recent pieces on the subject, and an upcoming seminar in San Francisco is devoting a panel discussion to it.

It's getting a little tiring, frankly. And it smacks of the kind of condescension women in the workplace have been dealing with for decades.

For those of you who haven't read about it, it seems that there's a growing rumble among women lawyers (read: two associates who happen to have the ear of a reporter) that their female predecessors in the profession are out to get them. Or at the very least, are trying to shut the youngsters out of a meaningful professional life.

Generation Gap

The theory is that the senior women, who had to claw their way up through the ranks with little or no support from other women (and often active opposition from their male counterparts) expect the women entering the profession today to pay the same dues they did in their younger days.

For their part, the theory goes, younger women lawyers still find the profession inhospitable and sorely need their predecessors to give them a hand as they work their way up. Unfortunately, say the outspoken associates, the women who preceded them have developed "Queen Bee" syndrome and don't want to share the wealth or the power with anyone else.

Please.

The truth is most women, including myself, actually like working with other women. We seek them out in the workplace and enjoy working in firms where there is a healthy representation of our gender (although we equally enjoy working with male colleagues). Given the fact that, outside of the office, most women seek out a cadre of girlfriends, it's no surprise that we like to extend those relationships into the office.

This is not to say that every older woman attorney helps the career of those below her. But the blanket assertion that women of different generations are plotting against each other is ridiculous. It's merely an extension of the sexist notion that two women working together are always 1 inch away from a catfight.

Perpetual Truism

And that's also not to say that there aren't generational differences, but they're not limited to women. At a mere 39, even I have been known to grouse about the seeming lack of initiative and drive among the youngest generation of lawyers. And I'm sure my predecessors considered my generation of lawyers a bunch of slackers as well. That's a perpetual truism that

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has nothing to do with gender.

It's discouraging to see so much made of the so-called generation gap between women lawyers. If it exists, I submit that it's by far the exception rather than the rule. And, for those women who see themselves coming out on the short end of the generation chasm, I offer these thoughts:

- Expect the same treatment from senior women lawyers as you do from senior male attorneys. Nobody considers it a "gender thing" when a male boss issues curt commands and fails to inquire about an associate's weekend. Don't resent it when a woman does the same. Your boss is your boss, not your girlfriend. So don't be hurt when she acts like your boss.
- Keep your situation in perspective. The women who broke down the first barriers in the legal profession did so at great expense to their own personal lives. Many steered clear of marriage altogether. And of those who did marry, many opted not to have children. They worked crucifying hours and put up with sexist behavior. They didn't work part time or flex time or telecommute one day a week. They didn't ask to and they didn't expect their bosses to offer such arrangements. They were just happy to get a paycheck.

To the first generation of women lawyers, the current batch of young women lawyers don't know how easy they've got it. All this talk of "balance" and "juggling work and family" seems a bit greedy to a group of women who had to fight like hell just to get a job interview, let alone make partner.

I'm not suggesting that young women need to buy into the model that the women pioneers lived with. That would be moving back in time. But while young women are complaining about how poorly the profession treats working parents, they should recognize that the women who came before them probably didn't get to be parents at all.

So while I'll concede that the generations may have different perspectives, I don't see that it's caused a rift between them. If anything, the trials withstood by senior women lawyers have convinced them that the profession could use some fine-tuning if it hopes to retain the talented women who are entering it in record numbers.

And the more of those women who stick around, the better it will be for the profession in the long run.