

## Singled out

**By Stuart White**  
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For a man to be single at my age somewhere between 40 and - ok this isn't too important and I am not using the term middle aged- is really not a problem, quite the opposite in fact. It's often seen as a source of envy. Guys in the bar joke that I have no ball and chain, I am as free as the wind and the term eligible is frequently used. Men are generally subject to less scrutiny as they age and can be acceptably single at all ages. But for woman it's a very different tale. When you are single and in your 40s you are not 'unattached' but 'unmarried' – and, as a recent article in the New York Times points out, it's a cruel distinction and terrifying crossover. Unmarried, old maid, spinster, on the shelf...

Our attitude to single women is surprisingly quite archaic in this day and age. This is nowhere else more ridiculously apparent than in the shenanigans going on in Washington at the moment about the potential appointment of Elena Kagan to become the youngest judge appointed to the Supreme Court. The fact that Elena Kagan is young, age 50, for such a position and, if appointed, will be the third woman currently sitting on the Supreme Court, is not the highlight of the story. Neither is the fact that she is articulate, obviously highly intelligent and has an impressive career history. Indeed, the most important fact about this appointment appears to be that she has never married!

Rumours that Kagan might be gay (apparently she fits the profile) ruffled some democrats' feathers ( surprising – thought they were pro gay?) so the White House, in an attempt to squash the rumours, worked very hard (some say all too enthusiastically), promoting her with the most ancient of stereotypes - that 'Kagan is simply a smart, ambitious woman who threw herself into her work, couldn't find a guy, threw up her hands, and threw herself further into her work – and in the process went from single to confirmed spinster. The White House's narrative of Kagan suggests that she is over the hill, out of luck – that at 50 the game is over for her. She is undesirable, unwanted, doomed to live a cloistered, a-sexual existence, all the better to get on with the job without any distractions!

I mean, come on, what's that all about. Bad enough that the White House panics thinking that a gay woman may be appointed to the bench but when they paint her as a sad spinster it's a tad patronising for all single, career women over 40. What is most abhorrent is the label they stick on Ms. Kagan, one that wouldn't be entertained on a man.

I am not sure that older and single is as much of a problem for women in Botswana, but being a strong, successful and powerful woman might be. This is not peculiar to Botswana. We have stereotypes about career woman so strongly entrenched that even I caught myself acting on one the other day. Interviewing a high-powered senior business woman I asked her how she would feel reporting to another woman similar to herself. I immediately brought myself up by realising how sexist my comment was. I would never challenge a male candidate with a similar question.....so what was my underlying bias and where was it coming from? Was it that two strong, powerful women can't work together or that somehow this woman should not have been powerful in the first place?

I have, on occasion, seen powerful women be discriminated against in interviews – for being too competent, too good and too assertive. In a male-dominated world this doesn't always cut the mustard especially if the value system, although hidden, supports a belief that she should rather be at home baking and not cooking up strategies in the boardroom. I have also on occasion counseled women to tone down their strength of character for some interviews where I think a strong personality, confidence and assertiveness may be too much for the panel. Nothing new there. Powerful woman have been toning it down for centuries to appease the egos of men. A few years ago on the US TV programme 60 Minutes, some female Harvard Business School students said that they hid the fact that went to Harvard from guys they met because it was the kiss of death with men who were threatened by more successful women. "The H-bomb" they called it. Does the male "macho" gene prohibit us from admitting that, deep down, the male gender has an instinctive fear of its female counterpart? Does it secretly make us feel emasculated? And what would be the response if I asked a male candidate how he would feel reporting to a high-powered female superior?

It can be a hard territory for woman - this place called work, so here's a little advice I found on a female empowerment website that may help you find the courage to weather the storm and not give up when labels are attached to you and allegations are tossed your way: Tall trees get blown about the most. In other words, if you stand out from the crowd, you'll be noticed. And in Botswana, being noticed is not necessarily a good thing. Here we believe in equality. No one is better than anyone else. No one should stand out. Many of us were raised with strong parental or cultural messages about the perils of self-promotion. "Don't brag." "Pride comes before a fall."

Humility is a virtue, - hubris was a character fault, especially if you were a girl. Times change and girls grow up. Don't compromise if you are a strong woman and don't back down. To work hard but then stay quiet about what your accomplishments are is like lighting a candle and hiding it under a bushel. First, no-one will see you shine. Second, your career could be extinguished from lack of oxygen. And third, if you want to set the world on fire, you're going to need a much bigger flame.

Agree or disagree with this? Don's twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to [http://twitter.com/Stuart\\_Botswana](http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana)

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