

Opinion **Work & Careers**

Women must demand the right to be as useless as men

Celebrating the inspiring, unstoppable and generally spectacular is plain wearying

PILITA CLARK



Demonstrators at last year's International Women's Day in London © Getty

Pilita Clark FEBRUARY 24, 2019

There is still more than a week to go before [International Women's Day](#) and already I am gripped by a familiar sense of exhaustion.

Each day brings another email or notice urging me to celebrate an inspiring, unstoppable or generally spectacular woman.

In London alone, I have been alerted to an Everest-conquering physicist, a visionary doctor entrepreneur and a quadrilingual vegan who floated a business in her twenties and works in refugee camps in her spare time.

There is no doubting the prowess of these women. Nor is there any question that the drive for female equality remains a dismally slow work in progress.

It was breathtaking to read a BBC [analysis](#) of a new crop of UK gender pay gap figures last week that showed four out of 10 private companies reporting a wider gap than they had last year.

Those figures are a jolting reminder that celebrating extraordinary women is no guarantee that the legions of less-than-stellar females are headed for relentless advancement.

In fact, the numbers raise a question about why we dwell on dazzling outliers at all. For one

thing, we cannot all be brilliant. It is also tiring to think we should be. Yet this is the message we are often sent, at times by the brilliant themselves.

Orna Ni-Chionna is one of Britain's most experienced female directors. An ex-McKinsey partner with a Harvard MBA, she has been on the boards of everything from the Bupa healthcare group to the Burberry fashion house and, less happily, Royal Mail, where she was [embroiled](#) in the recent shareholder revolt over executive pay.

Not that long ago, she wrote a [thoughtful blog](#) on the dearth of female chairs at large companies that included this eye-catching advice to women: "At interview we need to be twice as good as the men, to overcome the gaps in our CVs and the perceived risk in being different. I don't think we quite realise that."

This is doubtless true but in 2019, it is also intensely irksome. How much longer will women need to prove they are twice as good as men to get ahead? What might it take to change things?

Put another way, why do so many incompetent men become leaders?

That question is the title of a [new book](#) by a professor of business psychology named [Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) who thinks inept men benefit from our tendency to confuse confidence with leadership ability.

He says overbearing narcissists, who are statistically more likely to be men, find it easier to vault into top jobs at the expense of more able, considerate and humble people, who are often female, and we should rethink the way we judge sound leadership.

He has a point. I can think of plenty of quiet, modest people, male and female, who are beaten to top jobs by arrogant unfit loudmouths. Yet the belief that women are intrinsically nicer or better than men is fraught. It is just a slippery step away from the biological determinism that has long held women back in the first place. It is also uncomfortably close to that annoying urge to lionise the best and brightest on International Women's Day.

All of which reminds me why I have always harboured an urge to see an International Crap Women's Day. At one end of the spectrum, this would be a time to remember Parise Leandra Marciano Gale, the aspiring model who got so drunk on a plane last year that when she got off at Gatwick she thought she was still in [Morocco](#).

In business, we would think of Facebook's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, the self-styled face of lean-in feminism whose brand came a cropper after she was caught up in the string of [controversies](#) surrounding the company.

We would never forget Elizabeth Holmes, the 35-year-old once hailed as a female Steve Jobs now [facing charges](#) she defrauded investors in her blood-testing start-up, Theranos.

I joke of course. Yet there is a serious case to be made against the wearying expectation for

women to be always more able, more ethical, more generous and more inspiring. We must demand the right to be as incompetent, lazy and useless as any man. That is where true equality lies.

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