



Guilt, shame and the successful South African career woman

By Kurt April and Boipelo Mooketsi

Loving wife. Successful career-woman. Nurturing mother. Resourceful housekeeper. Energetic, fit and healthy. This is the ultimate modern woman: she can do everything, she can have it all ... or can she?

Many South African female executives strive to attain superwoman status, but soon realise that this level of perfection is just beyond their reach, where success in one area of life means failure to achieve in another.

Recent research from Africa's leading business school, the University of Cape Town (UCT) Graduate School of Business (GSB), has highlighted that an uncomfortable number of women at the top suffer in this way. Although they take immense pride in their work and achievements and are ambitious and driven to succeed against all odds, the sweet taste of success is soured by persistent feelings of guilt and shame.

The GSB research, which was carried out by Prof Kurt April and Boipelo Mooketsi set out to unpack what lies at the root of guilt and shame in the workplace. Intimate and detailed interviews were carried out with fourteen women in the search for answers. All were either founders of their own companies or held executive positions in the public or private sector.

Guilt and shame: what's the difference?

The researchers were looking for themes and patterns in their research – and found that the one common denominator in the lives of successful women was the internal conflict they experienced between managing their career and home life objectives.

This appears to be fuelled by old norms, standards and cultural practices, which have, to a large extent, remained unchanged over the centuries, but are no longer applicable to modern day living. They dictate what is reasonable in terms of a woman's time management, work-life balance, family interaction and even the level of sacrifice she has to make to be successful in the corporate world.

Guilt is one reaction to this and is experienced when certain ethical and moral principles are violated, or some social value, norm, standard or cultural practice has been

transgressed. Shame, on the other hand, is a far more insidious reaction and is directly linked to the self, self-worth and personal ideals, and takes the form of feelings of inferiority, humiliation, shyness, inhibition and embarrassment.

Guilt and its manifestations

Guilt manifests in many different ways and the researchers categorised it according to themes as they emerged, from relationship guilt, responsibility guilt, guilt over affluence, guilt over achievement and survivor guilt.

'Relationship guilt' often occurs in close relationships, where one partner blames the self and feels guilty for the other's unhappiness – even when they have done nothing inherently wrong. Palesa*, a HR executive and consultant often missed going out to dinner with her husband as a result of working late. "I feel guilty when he is embarrassed that I put him through that," she says. "It's like you're implying that work comes first and he comes second."

Like Palesa*, Senior Financial Manager, Lisa* often felt 'responsibility guilt' for letting her work and her family down in some way. "Guilt that you're not spending enough time with your children and that you're not devoting as much time in the office as your male counterparts, but for me, staying at home all the time wouldn't have satisfied me intellectually," she says.

'Guilt over affluence' and 'guilt over achievement' are also common in South Africa, especially since Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity policies have enabled many previously disadvantaged women to climb the ladder of success. Company Director, Simphiwe*, recalled how she would downplay her wealth, often giving less money to the church than what she could really afford, afraid that others who saw would judge her for being more affluent or successful than them.

Previously disadvantaged women also experience 'survivor guilt', which is guilt for having 'made it out' of poverty to be living and enjoying more than what they perceive as their fair share of the pie. Palesa* spoke about how she felt obligated and pressured to help out everyone from her community. "Being raised by the

whole village [a black African notion] and not just one's biological parents and the contributions of the community [however big or small] usually brings with it some expectations to help the village when one starts earning the big bucks," she says.

Shame and its manifestations

Shame is not an easy emotion to admit to because it is something people would rather not talk about. They are often 'ashamed of their shame.' Feelings of inferiority – a result of shame – often cause women to feel small when compared to others. Although none of the women interviewed for this research consciously believed that they were inferior to men, they could easily outline the disparities that existed between them – where they needed to 'earn their stripes' more than the men did.

Not only must women earn their stripes at work, they must also juggle all the roles of being a mother and wife at home. Women who are able to successfully handle all the roles in which they are cast, often find themselves in a Catch-22 situation. In order to maintain their success, they have to be able to switch between the personalities of domesticated wives and high powered executives. Says Palesa*: "When women are at work, they are expected to assume a certain role and when they go home, they are expected to change the way they behave. For the whole day, you are used to instructing and leading, and at home you have to assume the role of a subservient person."

Another challenge facing executive women is networking opportunities, which are often male-oriented social outings, geared at advancing in the corporate arena. In South Africa, these social outings include fishing, 4X4/SUV expeditions, watching rugby, hunting and even visiting strip clubs. Business Development executive, Julie*, admitted that as an executive one has to be very thick-skinned. "I think it requires you to take on a personality trait that you do not like, and it goes against your authenticity. It often requires one to ask deeper questions like: 'Am I being authentic, and if I am not, can I sustain it?'"

Authenticity also comes into question when looking at 'association shame', which refers to 'letting down one's



reference group'. Senior Financial Manager, Lisa* explained that the reason for keeping other women out of her corporate ring was to ensure that they did not reveal the "naked truth about me or 'us'", where one could be embarrassed or bring disrepute to the entire group.

Supporting women through understanding

The fact that such feelings are being experienced by women at the top may go some way towards explaining why there are so few women in high places in South Africa.

In March this year, the 2011 Women in Leadership census released by the Businesswomen's Association (BWA), showed that women still hold only 4.4% of CEO/MD positions, 5.3% of chairperson positions and 15.8% of all directorships in South Africa.

In an effort to make corporate South Africa more representative along gender lines, the BWA is calling for various measures to be put in place, such as the inclusion of a clause about gender diversity for all companies who want to be listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

However, while this development may assist with gender transformation, the research on guilt and shame hints that women will never be fully empowered unless some other things shift as well. The researchers call explicitly for men to become equally empowered in the home so that there are fewer expectations placed on women and more support is offered to women. Equally importantly, women need to work on their own perspectives about themselves.

Not many successful women will even admit to experiencing feelings of shame and guilt; however acknowledging these feelings and speaking out is a first and important step in overcoming them.

The voices of the women featured in the UCT Graduate School of Business research are useful in this regard. They could also play a vital role in helping corporates to find new ways to support women in the workplace. Top employers such as Accenture, certified in the CRF Institute Best Employers Survey in 2010, already do much to support women, including offering flexible working hours and the option of working full- or part-time. Accenture has 34.5% women in senior management positions.

By understanding the unique challenges women face, and finding ways to support and develop them, employers can also play a key role in helping create a guilt- and shame-free generation of energetic and empowered women leaders.

* Names have been changed to protect identity

