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Caitlin Moran: what young women really need to know

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‘I’ve never said it before but this is my advice to young women:
don’t shack up with a bad boy’

I was sitting with a group of female friends last week, musing what secrets older women keep from younger ones.

Younger women are always asking older women for advice, and we always want to give it. Because most advice for young women is unpleasant hectoring about the state of their vaginas, or how silly they are to like any of the things they like, and we wish to be more positive about their astonishing power, potential and goodness.

We tell them that the best thing to do – when you feel that you are lost in the sea of life – is to pick the thing you love to do most and use that as a star to steer by. That you must not tolerate having an unkind inner voice, and that you definitely need to work out which colours suit you best – over time, it becomes a truly destabilising issue to keep buying salmon-coloured blouses that make your eyes look small and your face like a ham, because you will have to drink quite heavily to dull the pain of that knowledge.

And me and all my friends nodded, and went, “Yeah, yeah, that’s what we all say. All the positive stuff.”

There was a pause.

And then one said: “And what don’t we tell them? What do we all worry might ... f*** them up, if they knew? Which ones make you go all Jack Nicholson, and, ‘YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH’ ?”

And while my friends had many suggestions – the most passionate of which almost invariably involved the unspoken bum damage that comes with childbirth – the one I have always felt most reluctant about is this: nine times out of ten, a woman’s life will only be as good as the man she marries.

I don’t want to say this! I don’t want it to be true! I’ve never said it before because it feels, on first analysis, to be unfeminist to tell bright, hard-working, joyous women that it doesn’t matter how incredible they are, how many degrees they get, how many businesses they start up from scratch. If they then shack up with a self-pitying man who’s not very good at replying to texts, “freaks out” when they have kids, doesn’t use the washing machine because “I’m just not good at stuff like that,” “always” has to see “the guys” at the weekend to “wind down”, and flies into terrifying rages if, for example, he can’t find his favourite suede jacket – they are doomed.

We want those women to do well. They should still get promoted, be happy and succeed in life, because of their sheer determination, hard will and charisma. But they almost certainly won’t.

Life is an experiment that bears this out. I’m 42 now. Of all the married women I know who have children, all the ones who are successful in their careers and are happy are, without exception, the ones who married, for the want of a better word, “good” men. Gentle, clever, kind, funny men, usually in cardigans, who just show up for everything. Ones who at a bare minimum cut it 50-50 with the housework, childcare and emotional upkeep.

Furthermore – and again, without exception – the women who have done the best in their careers and are happiest have the partners who do more than 50-50. The more their partners do – the more

they engage in childcare and housework – the higher those women fly.

It's amazing that this shouldn't be an obviously known fact – the equivalent of knowing that if you marry a butcher, you'll have a lot of sausages, or that if you marry a lighthouse-keeper, you will live in a lighthouse. The maths are simple, however: if you have children, you can only have as much career and happiness as your partner will help make for you. You are dependent on him. Because all you have is your time. And as we all have a finite amount of the stuff, every tiniest increment counts.

Even a man who does 40 per cent of the childcare and housework (who you'd think was a good guy – 40 per cent! That's nearly half!) is leaving 10 per cent of his shit for you to sort out. His trousers to wash, his kids to raise, his meals to prepare. Here's what that would look like if it were a picture: a woman pulling a sledge on which her career and her children sat – with her partner occasionally jumping on, ten per cent of the time, “to chill”.

This is why, of all the things young women say, “I'm into bad boys” makes older women wince as hard as if they had just said, “I'm into heroin.” No, girls! You do not want a bad boy! If you find yourself saying that, go and get cognitive behavioural therapy right now – or else say out loud, “I formally renounce all my plans for a career, and happiness, in order to marry the wrong man.”

Because if she wants children, a woman's life is only as good as the man she marries. That's the biggest unspoken truth I know.

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