

What really happens with happily ever after?

Ng Tze Yeng, originally published 2 October 2006 in [The Sun](#)

In between fits of laughter and teary-eyed monologues at a birthday party of a dear friend, I realised I was having an experience that I hadn't had for a long time. Glancing around the room full of women of different backgrounds and ages, there was a sense of solidarity, of belonging, of sisterhood, that I hadn't felt since the trials and tribulations of being in an all girls volleyball team in secondary school.

Since leaving secondary school and "growing up", most social gatherings with my girlfriends have been in the presence of men - as in "the one we have something going on with", boyfriends, fiancés, and now husbands. As women, we're doing OK in society's eyes, as we've done what every self-respecting woman should do - we've "snared" our "man", we've got support, and we're well on our way to becoming mothers. We're doing OK.

But there are just some things that society doesn't tell you about "happily ever after". They don't tell you that marriage is really about a legal union of equal partners working at growing together in a relationship. They don't tell you that just because you are the woman, you don't have to take full responsibility to cook, clean, take care of the kids after 8 to 10, sometimes even 12 hours of paid work. They don't tell you that having arguments is another form of (highly discouraged) communication, and that arguments don't mean that your relationship has failed. They also forgot to tell you that it's OK to see a marriage counsellor; that it's a positive step before the rot sets in and perhaps that it might be the start of a deeper, more intense relationship. Women in general, certainly have been conditioned by society enough to "naturally know" that good women are supposed to sacrifice for the family, to be selfless.

Just because a woman is married, it doesn't mean that she belongs to her husband, body, mind and soul. She still has a right to her body, sanity and life by walking out, filing a report with the authorities should her husband physically, psychologically, sexually or verbally abuse or force her to have sex. There are even terms for it - domestic violence and marital rape.

But society never forgets to remind us women, through their labels like "expired goods", man-hater, loose, slut or lesbian, about the punishment of social ostracisation if we don't settle down with a man. Single women in the high-income bracket are almost always showcased as examples of those who have not been able to fit the "selfless nurturer" role. Despite their financial and professional successes, they are reported to find happiness in belonging to a man, and to "return to the feminine". They no longer want to be too successful, too educated, too sure of themselves, too outgoing, too dynamic - too everything in the "masculine world".

From our childhood fairy tales where the princess gets rescued; to tales, movies, advertising, music videos, songs and the "real life experience" of finding the "strong one that completes me"; how we behave in most heterosexual relationships is reinforced through the male/female opposites which usually mean: masculine/feminine, protector/protected, active/passive, dominant/subordinate, public/private, brave/ meek, brash/tolerant, lone ranger/longing to belong, served/server, hunter/gatherer.

Most of us were systematically indoctrinated throughout our lives as women, so that we believe our worth is very much dependent on our ability to become good mothers and good wives, and the rest is peripheral. Men too were handed out the role of providers, strong, unemotional despite some not necessarily feeling or wanting to be that way. We unquestioningly accepted that to be a woman means we are not man, and vice versa - we define who we are by not being the "other". Maybe it's time for us to start looking into relationships that we've long forgone, either consciously or subconsciously, like the joys of sisterhood, brotherhood, of humanity, experiencing the intense richness of relationships just by being human, and not our limited gender roles.

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