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Judge's Ruling is a Victory for Women Who Work

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ACTING FEMININE

Judge's ruling is a victory for women who work

"Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair."

—Edith Wharton, 1900.

"When I think well and am intelligent, the critics say I have a man's mind. When I am silly or not at my best, they admit indulgently that I am very feminine."

—Katherine Anne Porter, 1958

By Patricia McLaughlin

It used to be — maybe still is — that girls who wanted to play ball with the boys were likely to be told they lacked the required skills, e.g., "You throw like a girl." But when Ann Hopkins was proposed as a partner at Price Waterhouse in 1983, a handful of partners in the big accounting firm voted no because she didn't throw enough like a girl.

One said Ms. Hopkins was too "macho." Another said she needed to go to "charm school." Another said she was overcompensating for being a woman.

Her boss, who'd given her a glowing recommendation, advised her that, if she wanted to win over the naysayers, she should "walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear makeup, have her hair styled and wear jewelry."

Ms. Hopkins had billed more hours and brought in more business than any of the other 87 candidates — all of whom were male but none of whom, apparently, was too macho. She was non-plussed by her boss's well-meant advice.

She didn't take it, either. Instead of hiring an image consultant or signing up for the full treatment at Elizabeth Arden, she quit and sued.

In May, Federal District Judge Gerhard A. Gesell ordered Price Waterhouse to invite her back — as a partner and at the salary she'd likely be making if she'd been one since '83. Price Waterhouse will appeal in September.

Nonetheless, Judge Gesell's decision is a victory for every woman who suspects that it is not really possible to have it all. It's not possible to do a decent job at work and also keep a house as spotless as your mother's, not to mention the from-scratch chocolate cakes and inventive hand-made Halloween costumes, because there just isn't time. It also isn't possible to be the sort of tough-minded, hard-driving, serious, authoritative person you have to be to succeed in some businesses and also be the sweet, gracious, self-effacing charmer who married dear old dad. You have to choose, because trying to have it both ways will twist you into a human pretzel.

But, when you've chosen to focus a lot of attention on your work, it hardly seems fair to have the people you work for blame you for not spending enough time at the hairdresser. And when you've succeeded at your work, it seems unfair for them to criticize the traits responsible for your success.

Ms. Hopkins' own view is that, having been born female, she's de facto feminine — even without makeup, which she can't deal with anyway because she can't see without her trifocals and can't get mascara on under them.

But that's finessing the issue. In fact, many of the traits that make women seem feminine and men masculine are culturally assigned and carefully learned ways of behaving that serve to mark or highlight the differences and specify the relationships between the sexes. Some are entirely arbitrary: "feminine" traits like wearing skirts, putting on makeup, and having long swishy hair and long fingernails don't have anything to do with being born female; in other cultures, men have been the ones to wear the skirts and the war paint and keep their hair and nails long. Markers of femininity like giggling, sidling up to issues in-

Ann Hopkins' suit paid off.

stead of addressing them directly, and ending all your statements on a rising note, as if you're not quite sure, are curtsies to male dominance. Like the airheaded ditziness some women affect — "Me, figure out the tip?" — they're submission signals that assure men that the supposed ditz has no intention of challenging them or the established balance of power between the genders.

Being born female doesn't mean you have to act like this, and you can see why a lot of people wouldn't want to. Since a lot of this behavior is intended to reassure men, you can also see how its absence might make some of them nervous.

But, thanks to Judge Gesell, that's their problem now. Patricia McLaughlin is a columnist for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

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