

Aggressive women vs passionate men: Negotiating a tricky serve

Serena Williams' behaviour in the US Open final raises questions about whether women are treated differently if they show emotions



Serena Williams' behaviour, aggressive or not, was seen by most as not displaying sportsmanship. Similarly, corporates also have rules of behaviour. Photo: AFP

The recent uproar over Serena Williams' behaviour during the US Open final has divided fans into two camps—those who believe she did not show sportsmanship, stealing the limelight from the deserving victor, 20-year-old Naomi Osaka; and those who say she touched on a sensitive issue, highlighting how women are penalized more than men, both on court and at work, for similar offences. And while Williams may not be entirely blameless for her role in the entire fracas, different standards for men and women at the workplace is an issue that should be debated.

In the corporate world, decorum at work is a stated virtue, but when things go wrong—unmet targets, lackadaisical response from the team—is calm behaviour expected only from women bosses? Do men who express their frustration get away by being labelled as passionate and dedicated while a woman boss is seen as an “angry feminist” having a meltdown? “This invisible barrier to the perceptions of women at the workplace causes stress in women as they are hesitant in demanding their due or protesting against unfairness. The biggest culprits are the women themselves as they judge other women too harshly for the same offence,” says Poornima

Gupta, associate professor, human resource management and organizational behaviour, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurugram. A 2008 study titled “Can An Angry Woman Get Ahead” by Victoria L. Brescoll and Eric Luis Uhlmann, found that due to strong, deeply entrenched stereotypes, people attribute a man’s anger as a response to objective, external circumstances, and a woman’s anger as a product of her personality. “Subsequently, a woman showing anger at workplace is seen as immature or less competent, whereas men who fly off the handle are given higher status and respect,” explains Prof. Gupta.

The outspoken, emotional woman is considered a bit of an aberration even in the corporate world. She is thought of as being temperamental, making it difficult for women sometimes to express themselves without feeling inhibited. Suresh Narayanan, chairman and managing director, Nestle India, says while temper tantrums should be disassociated from the “gender card”, the corporate world is sometimes prone to classifying women professionals with strong viewpoints as “abrasive” in a negative sense— a man with similar qualities is seen as “assertive”. “There is dependency on the age mix within organizations—the older generation of men are likely to be more uncomfortable with such behaviour in women at work than the younger generations,” says Rituparna Chakraborty, president, Indian Staffing Federation and co-founder of staffing firm TeamLease. Sahil Nayar, who works with a leading consulting firm, believes that the entire gender emotion parity debate is more of a mindset challenge than anything else. He says there are two ways to challenge this mindset. “One is when the management has to step in and say that equal treatment will be meted out for similar behaviour, no matter the gender. But the second is even before the management gets involved. Be it a display of emotion in the workplace or in the field, at the end of it, the onus of course correction essentially lies with the individual.” For Rehan Yar Khan, investor and managing partner at Orios Venture Partners, Williams’s stance of fighting for women’s rights can set a dangerous precedent. “We need to be careful not to undermine the great work done for women’s rights by Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Malala Yousafzai, Gloria Stienam and Tarana Burke (founder of #MeToo) by justifying rude behaviour as a fight for women’s rights. Williams attacked the referee several times and later, justified it as a fight for women’s rights; her justification being that men were getting away with it, so should she. That is not only incorrect, but the position that two wrongs make a right is distressing,” he says. In fact, he feels, it’s inaccurate to say that a man’s aggressive behaviour is more acceptable than a woman’s. If that were the case, Uber founder Travis Kalanick wouldn’t have been sacked. Speaking from personal experiences that she has had in the business community, Ameera Shah, managing director, Metropolis Healthcare, says there is a fine line between trying your best (as a woman) and facing gender discrimination, and you not really being the best and using gender as an excuse. “I hope, more and more, we all have the

confidence to play using our strengths as women and not comparing ourselves to men on everything,” she says. So, how can corporates ensure equal treatment? Narayanan advises, “While I cannot generalize behaviour patterns, it is fair to say that we tend to observe women’s reactions rather critically and especially what we may classify as misdemeanours. It is the job of leaders, be they men or women, to constantly oppose such stereotyping if they want to build a professional, competence-based, diversity-embracing culture in their organizations. So please leave your prejudices at the door when you walk into your office.” Just as in the tennis world, a rule is a rule, whether a man breaks it or a woman, corporate rules of behaviour should also be gender neutral. “Conducting oneself with dignity and maturity is equally impending on both men and women at the workplace and that can never be undermined notwithstanding the gender battle,” says Chakraborty. The takeaway from the incident at the US Open finals, Shah feels, is to ensure that one doesn’t allow the anger to fester and move on, because if you don’t, you will be putting yourself in a weaker position. As a result, “now, we have an Achilles heel that the opponent can exploit. If Serena had not held on to her outrage on being warned for coaching and had moved on to the next point with a neutral frame of mind, she could have probably won the match,” she says.

Feedback can be biased for women

Research suggests that managers tend to give women generic feedback as they do not want to hurt their feelings. Men on the other hand receive objective and specific feedback. The same research suggests that those who receive the specific feedback are most likely the ones to succeed in the organization. To remove these unconscious biases while appraising an employee, it is advisable to remove all subjective benchmarks.

—Chryslynn D’Costa, head (diversity and inclusion), Serein.in

The story can be read online, [here](#).