



one element (or, more likely, the complex interplay of many) that means, to date, we've only had one female prime minister and that women are still vastly underrated at the top of their fields.

Michelle, however, had none of those confused thoughts. She knew without a doubt that her experience was because of her gender. How? Because Michelle had been born a man, and was a venture capitalist before she became transgender—and not once did another man cut her off or steal her airspace in the way that happened that day and many other days like it. On that occasion, I snapped at the culprit and reclaimed my space by throwing his aggressive male energy back at him," she says. "These days I would act differently. I've learnt that the successful women I know don't act like men to enjoy personal power. They have their own strong female energy that comes from being truly confident in who they are and in being in touch with the innate authority of their gender."

Actress Rebecca Root, star of *Boy Meets Girl*, due to premier in the autumn, the BBC's first mainstream sitcom to feature a transgender actress playing a leading trans role, is also an internationally renowned voice coach. She works with both transitioning and cisgender (those living as their birth gender) people, who either want to alter their voices after gender reassignment or to perfect a vocal approach for a role. She describes having seen life from two perspectives as being "an extraordinary insight and, even though it didn't feel like it at the time [before transitioning], an amazing privilege, ultimately a blessing rather than a curse." For Root, living visibly as a woman for the last 12 years, the idea that society treats women differently to men is an incontrovertible fact. "I have definitely seen for myself how much stronger women have to be to carve out a career, form relationships, achieve anything they want to achieve. As a

man, I had many things much easier. Becoming female has also tuned her radar to the oppression that cisgender women absorb from birth as being an inevitable part and price of being a woman. "The objectification of women in popular culture, being patronised, demeaning advertising, and of course the fear of sexual assault and rape, are all things that worry and upset me now."

In person, Rebecca exudes a calm, natural presence and confidence. She's deeply feminine but commands attention. But what advice would she give to women who feel they're not getting their due respect despite possessing equal or superior intelligence to their male colleagues and producing on-par results? "Being truly confident and assertive is not about being more confrontational," she says. "It's about truly knowing who you are and understanding your strengths. I'm far less confrontational and aggressive now than when I was a man—whether that's hormones or simply being in a much happier place, I can't say—but I'm certainly not less powerful. If I feel I'm not being listened to, I emotionally stand tall and strengthen my back. I add volume and lower my voice and make people listen. It works. Practise it at home if it doesn't come naturally, or find a voice coach. You literally cannot be heard if your voice is not commanding attention."

Trans performer Kate O'Donnell gets miffed at the endless trivial annoyances of being treated as smaller in every way that becoming a woman has brought. "I'm always given smaller

portions of food—I get tired of having to ask for bigger pieces of cake!"

But what about women who transition to men? Jay Stewart is a campaigner for trans awareness and equality and runs support group Gendered Intelligence. "I feel people take me more seriously now and I'm thriving in my career. I always notice the occasions when I'm out with my girlfriend and people talk to me and not her, for no logical reason. I once had a girlfriend who was a carpenter and when we visited a hardware shop, the male staff insisted on talking to me, even though I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. It's true that men take owning space and being listened to for granted." Jay's advice to women who don't feel they can do the same comfortably is to find their inner power through self-development. "There's no denying we live in a patriarchal world. I've lived it as a male and a female and it's real enough. But that doesn't mean you can't challenge it and find your own space to own as a woman."

Michelle concurs. "For many years I was a serious judo enthusiast. In judo, I learnt that to win you must judge and then turn the opponent's force against them. Life is the same. Today, I wouldn't rail against that man in the meeting. I'd let him say his bit, then say, 'Now I'd like to answer the question you asked me.' I don't need to use my old male energy to meet male aggressiveness head on like an express train. I'll turn it back on him in my own, strong, female way."

Michelle says it's true that trans women haven't grown up surrounded by the patriarchy that can oppress women from the inside out, and that means some cisgender women dismiss her insight as unhelpful. She begs to differ. "I don't agree. Successful women don't blame the world for their woes. They take personal responsibility and they work on themselves. The best advice I can offer any woman is to know yourself and the rest will follow."