



WHAT DOES FEMININITY MEAN NOW?

A blessing, a curse, outer beauty, inner strength, tender, tough ... it's never meant the same thing to any two people. We asked eight women for their perspective on the ever-evolving female mystique. By Nicole Partridge

EMMA PHILLIPS/LIZARD MANAGEMENT





◀ **KATE CARLYLE, 33**
JOURNALIST

"Two years ago, I lost my breasts to cancer. Even though my breasts were not a huge part of my femininity, I do miss them, and I feel less feminine as a result. I recall the last shower I had with them, knowing they were about to go off to the surgeon and the pathologist to end up in, for want of a better term, a Tupperware container to be examined.

"After they were removed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: I had the physique of a teenage boy. In that moment, I realised I had lost what was inherently feminine to a woman. To peel back a dressing and see a scar instead of a nipple was a huge shock. What's more feminine than a nipple? They feed children, they have sexual functions. That sensation is not there and they, physically, are not there. That's a challenge.

"Although I have lost part of my femininity, I've come to realise that fem-

ininity is more about character and elegance; a delicate nature and consideration – attributes that come from my grandmother and my mother.

"My mother was generous in spirit and kind-hearted. My grandmother came from an era in which expressing femininity involved a dressing ritual: clothing, jewellery, hats, gloves, shoes and handbags – all matching, of course! Both were feminine, but strong women.

The old expression, 'iron fist in a velvet glove', that's what they were. Due to them, I understand that the essence of being a woman has nothing to do with your physical parts.

"I've had a reconstruction, so from the outside I look very much like I used to. I can still put on those killer heels. I'm proud of being able to endure the barbaric treatment necessary to fight breast cancer. I believe with tone, empathy and consideration, the femininity from deep inside of me will always be evident."

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CARLY CRUTCHFIELD, 29 ▶
BUSINESSWOMAN

"I am proud of the level of success I've achieved, and I'm proud I have been able to do it without adopting a male persona. The generation before me will often ask, 'Hasn't it been tough getting to where you are as a woman?' That just doesn't make sense to me. I have never felt the need to prove myself or wear power suits to achieve success in business.

"I love looking 'girly', and I'm not afraid to be feminine. I see many advantages to being a woman in business. I do have some masculine energy – I think we all do – and there are definitely parts of being the boss that play to that. But I see being a woman as my real advantage in business. For one, I've got a great corporate culture, and I think I've cultivated it using my female intuitions. I also think I'm more willing to get creative and make mistakes. There's less ego with women.

"I think there's huge power in femininity. I'd never deny myself that instinct to get to the top. I try to harness it, and use it wisely. I don't mean using femininity to get what you want. Femininity's not a tool – it's a state of being."



"I see many advantages to being a woman in business"

PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMMA PHILLIPS/ALZARD MANAGEMENT.
SPECIAL THANKS TO CBJ THE HEALTH CLUB, WWW.CBJ.COM.AU



"Outwardly, I may look different to other women, but inwardly, I'm just as vulnerable"

▲ **KAHLA BULLEMOR, 32**
PROFESSIONAL BODY BUILDER

"I don't think you need to be beautiful to be feminine. I believe femininity comes from within. Outwardly, I may look different to other women, but inwardly, I'm just as vulnerable. People rarely realise this. To me, femininity is not a weakness. It is a strength and I'd never trade it.

"I'm proud of who I am and what I have achieved as an athlete, but at times, being in this body can be a bit of a struggle. It's not the norm to see a muscular female. I get a lot of looks. Despite not being able to find a lot of clothes that fit, I try to promote a feminine image.

When I go out, I make an effort to do my hair, apply make-up and wear jewellery.

"Some time back, I had an abusive ex-boyfriend who scared and intimidated me. Instead of being sympathetic, people would say, 'You'll be alright; you can stand up for yourself.' It's the perception that because you are muscular, you don't need support. They don't take into consideration that you have a heart and things still hurt you as a woman.

"When I go out, I find that men are more interested in how much I can bench press than who I am as a person. Often they'll walk past me and grab my biceps. It's then I'll go, 'Hang on – I am a woman.'

"In 2007, I was asked to speak on behalf of the military to promote women in the defence force. (Bullemor worked as a service police investigator in the air force.) At the same time, I was a national body-building champion. It made me think, 'OK, I am a female and I'm able to take on these male-dominated roles. I can be both.' It's about the combination of softness and strength.

"In a perfect world, I believe men and women should be treated as equals in careers and sport, but in a relationship, I would love to be treated like a princess. No matter how big my biceps are. I guess that's a feminine thing." ▶



◀ **ARIANNA STARR, 32**
STRIPTease ARTIST

“I feel very feminine with my clothes off. Not naked, but wearing my costumes – full of diamantés and feathers. There is no place on earth that I feel more like a woman than when I am on stage performing. At 23, I won my first title as a stripper, ‘Miss Nude Australia’. As the tiara was being placed on my head and I was handed the trophy, I can remember feeling so glamorous and feminine.

“Although I am happy with the way my body looks, naked or clothed, I did make a decision to get implants a few years ago. I think for some young women today, femininity is about going under the knife, getting boob jobs, lip enhancers and Botox. Most of my clientele – who range from blue-collar workers to high-end businessmen – come to see women who have a feminine physique. They don’t want skinny or toned or muscly, but womanly curves – we call this ‘skinny fat’ in my industry – these are the girls who look good in swimwear and lingerie.

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“Femininity is not really about beauty. I think you can be unattractive and still be very feminine. To me, it’s the way you carry yourself; it’s about sensuality, beautiful curves and movement. I look at my sister who has five children and is an athlete. I see her as strong, beautiful and very feminine. My other sister is fragile in physique and always wearing flowing dresses. I see them both as very womanly, but in different ways.

“Being feminine is not about being forceful. I think prominent and powerful women can seem a bit less feminine. When you are at the top of the game and always pushing for more, it seems hard and unappealing. A ferocious and domineering female is not very sensual. In my industry, clients are looking for the softer more sensual side of a woman, which they may not be seeing at home. I know it’s hard to run a family and be a seductress, but I guess men want to be enticed; they want some mystery – and that’s where my feminine power comes from.”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMMA PHILLIPS/ALZARD MANAGEMENT. SPECIAL THANKS TO HOME NIGHTCLUB, WWW.HOMESYDNEY.COM; CIRCUS BURLESQUE, WWW.CIRCBURLESQUE.COM; JOH BAILEY HAIRDRESSERS, WWW.JOHAILEY.COM.AU

KARLA REUTER, 27 ▶
ELITE ATHLETE

“On the outside, I may look less feminine than women who dress up or work in the city. My work clothes are soccer uniforms, and they don’t go well with heels. But don’t let that confuse you: I am proud and honoured to be a woman, and I don’t mind expressing that side of myself. I wouldn’t trade my femininity to become a Socceroo [male footballer].

“Recently, I attended an awards ceremony where I got all dolled up and wore a little black and white dress with heels, and did my hair and make-up. In that moment, I really felt like a woman. I always get excited when I get to go to these types of events, because it doesn’t happen often. I pretty much live in my sporting gear. If you go out in the city, you still see pretentious women who think it’s all about the looks and the mini skirts. I don’t see it that way. Nor do I think femininity is a weakness. This has been proven by all the successful women we have in politics and media: we have a woman prime minister; woman premiers. That’s to say nothing of Oprah! I think, overall, women have a nice balance of softness and strength.”

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ANNA PLAYFAIR, 82 ▶
RETIREEE

“When I think of femininity, the words that come to mind are softness, beauty and inner strength. When I was 18, I escaped communist Bulgaria and went to wait out the WWII in Rome. It was there, in Italy, that I first noticed the way a man could look at a woman – and at me, specifically. I learnt that it was important to look beautiful and that beauty was a big part of femininity.

“My mother, who was the most feminine woman I ever knew, used to say to me, ‘You have to be best dressed at home, not just when you go out.’ Even during the war, when nobody had anything, she would take down the curtains to make me dresses, which we always wore, even when we were just at home. I have two daughters now, and I’ve tried to impart the same lessons to them. But I also tell them that women

should have strength and confidence. I tell them that softness and beauty isn’t enough – they need to back it with intellect, education and humour. Both of my daughters started companies, and both have daughters. Each one of them is beautiful, feminine and intelligent, despite their unique temperaments.

“Perceptions of femininity have changed. Back in 1950 in Sydney, when I was engaged to my husband, we walked into a cocktail party – at one end there was a group of men talking; at the other end, a group of women. Today, women have a more equal place with men, and that’s a good thing. The only place where we are not equal with men is in giving birth. Women should never forget their most feminine role is to produce and nurture another human being. But they should do this without losing their femininity and strength.” ▶

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◀ **KADE SMITH, 43**
MECHANIC

"I am so proud to have been born a female and that I have not succumbed to the pressure society puts on individuals to be seen as male or female. I would describe myself as a blend of both male and female gender. To me, this is the best of both worlds: beautiful female intuition and sensitivity, coupled with handsome boyish good looks and physical ability.

"I like feeling strong. That's not to say I don't have female moments, like getting my period each month. At times, my friends catch me out for being girly. The other day my mates were hassling me at a party about drinking champagne with my pinkie sticking out. I'm not bothered by this. There are a lot of women out there trying to fit into the ideal and comparing one another. I don't subscribe to that.

"The way I look today feels natural to me, although it can cause problems, especially in public toilets. There is always one woman that says, 'You're in the wrong toilet!' So my response is,

"Femininity is more about tenderness, sensitivity ... not the externals"

"Thank you very much, but no I'm not.' I reply in a high-pitched female voice, which freaks them out even more.

"If we are talking about physical beauty, I think that can be confused to mean 'femininity', yet I've known some very mean, insensitive, yet physically stunning women. Femininity is more about tenderness, sensitivity, understanding, nurturing, compassion and creativity, not the externals.

"The most feminine person I have ever known is my mother. She has all these characteristics and is also the most physically beautiful woman I know. But I didn't want to be like that. In my spirit I knew I would never marry a man, have children or wear dresses and make-up.

"As early as I can remember I wanted to do boy things and wear boy's clothes. Even for my Year 10 formal I wore a bow tie and a tux. Going through puberty, I can clearly remember thinking, 'I don't want boobs.' Now, I understand that my female nature is a really beautiful part of who I am - I wouldn't trade it."



"I love being a girly-girl. I dress for my curves"

◀ **ALEXANDRA BARHAM, 26**
ONLINE PRODUCER

"I love being a girly-girl. I dress for my curves, work out regularly, and always make sure I'm put together. It requires discipline, but it's worth it.

"My boyfriend is an incredibly manly and dominant partner. He's very respectful, but you can tell by looking at us who is wearing the pants. I like it that way, and I know he does, too.

"A lot of my ideas about appearance come from my mother, the most fashionable person I know. She didn't go to university; it just wasn't done in her time. She's an amazing mum, and that's enough. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't go to uni, or that being a woman would hold me back from anything. I think nowadays that we get to have our cake and eat it, too. I'm an online producer. As soon as I sorted out what I wanted to do, I went for it. I've been told that I could get ahead by acting like the boys in the office, but I'd never do that. I may love girly things, but that doesn't make me a doormat." ■