



Voices  
from the  
Gaps



# Successful Women, Angry Men

## Bebe Moore Campbell

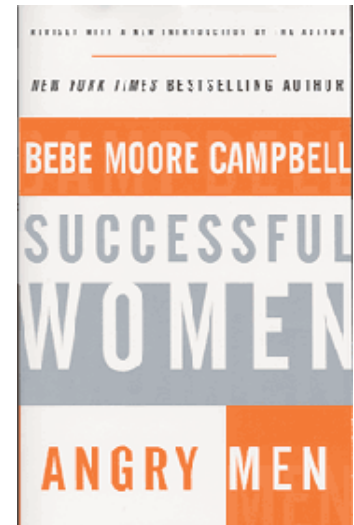
Every married and unmarried man and woman in America should read *Successful Women, Angry Men* by Bebe Moore Campbell. Overzealous as that statement may seem, this quick and concise read offers a unique view of the mechanics of marriage in our unstable, ever-changing society. The book is packed with interviews, statistics, and insightful suggestions of how to make a dual-career marriage work in today's American society.

The author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Brothers and Sisters* and winner of an NAACP Image Award for literature for her book *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* attacks the tremendously complex issues of enduring an egalitarian marriage in a society still dominated by patriarchal, traditional standards.

*Successful Women, Angry Men* not only includes experiences from Campbell's own marriage, but also includes the stories of 40-odd other couples and formerly married people. Those she interviews repeatedly express the anger, hurt and helplessness they feel when their marriage begins to suffer and they do not know where they went wrong. Campbell identifies the difficulties caused by both spouses maintaining full time careers, neglecting healthy communication, and misinterpreting (or simply being oblivious to) the basis of their spouses' discontent.

Campbell separates the ramifications of such marriages into 3 parts: Part I identifies the characteristics of the egalitarian marriage, Part II offers Campbell's in depth analysis of the 4 stages of what she terms "Backlash." Part III offers suggestions of resolution.

The focus of Part I highlights the ideal characteristics of the egalitarian marriage, the promises within, and the central, recurring problem of communication in such a marriage. In the realm of this problem the man wants to support his wife and her success, but has not been raised with the skills to express himself in the "new-marriage"; furthermore, the woman does not know how her success affects her husband since he cannot tell her what he is feeling, she only sees, and often misinterprets, the signs of his discontent. Campbell notes, "The women I met declared they had carefully chosen men who promised to aim and support them in their professional ascendancy. They were angry because their husbands withdrew the support just when they needed it most" (19).





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The woman feels that her husband “renewed” on his promise of helping around house and supporting her accomplishments in career. Her husband feels neglected and suffers a low self-esteem when he feels his wife does not need him because she is successful. As cited in *Successful Women, Angry Men*, a study at Rutgers University concludes that “husbands of women who work experience less job and life satisfaction than men who are married to homemakers. The study found that regardless of the husband’s age, income, or educational level, a wife’s employment has a negative impact on a man’s mental health” (64). Unattended, the situation leads to the stages of backlash.

Part II focuses on each stage of backlash and the symptoms that accompany each stage. Most every egalitarian-type-marriage-in-trouble encounters the following sequence: Stage I: Male Criticism and the Emergence of Superwoman (dubbed sublimation); Stage II: Angry Men, Burnt-Out Women (dubbed unleash); Stage III: All Out War; Stage IV: Terminal Affairs. In a nutshell:

\* In Stage I men criticize their wives, “They do this as a way to express disapproval and to manipulate women emotionally into being more dependent and subservient”(80). Men want women to pay attention to them by being closer and more loving, but they do not know how to express such simple desires (98).

\*In Stage II men attack their wives’ professions. In doing so, “men are attempting to minimize their wives’ accomplishments and their attachment to their careers” (111).

\*Abuse, both verbal and physical, typically occurs or worsens in Stage III. Chemical dependency also surfaces during this stage, which might trigger or exacerbate abuse.

\*By the time a couple reaches Stage IV they might seek external relationships for the positive attention they are not receiving from their spouse. At this point, there are two choices for the marriage: try to repair it or go your separate ways.

Part III is titled “Working On It.” Admittedly cliché, Campbell asserts that communication is key (173). A couple that wants to salvage their marriage must learn to talk and express what they are really feeling. “When couples talk at regularly scheduled intervals and as trust grows, they are able to disclose the emotions that are at the root of backlash” (180).



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Throughout the book, Campbell draws attention to the effects of having children, raising children, and the affects on the children in an egalitarian marriage gone wrong. She states that many career women “delay the pregnancy they know might result in a traditional straightjacket” (73). Having children may mean that the woman must be more dependent on the man; in Campbell’s view, the man knows this and the woman knows this, and they both manipulate the situation to their own ends. As much as society expects women to be subservient to their men, it has also conditioned men to think that they need a dependent woman to justify their existence. The complications are obvious.

Though marriage is not yet an element in my daily affairs, this book will help me and all attentive readers identify the symptoms of backlash in a marriage before it is too late to repair. For those newly married the book raises awareness of what to watch for and enunciates the importance of constant communication, and for readers already in marital turmoil, they will know that they are not alone and there are strategies to mend what’s been damaged as an alternative to throwing in the proverbial towel. As stated in the first line of this review, *Successful Women, Angry Men* offers counsel to Americans of all ages, races, and martial status.

*Reviewed by Kara Jesberger*