



Catfight

By Leora Tanenbaum
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Introduction

"Competitiveness between women is a fact. It has a history and function in American society that does not benefit women." So begins *Catfight: Rivalries Among Women -- From Diets to Dating, From the Boardroom to the Delivery Room*. In her follow-up to *Slut!*, Leora Tanenbaum presents this remarkably researched and easily readable foray into American women's world of aggression, rivalry, and competition and also draws the line between healthy competition and self-motivated, destructive sabotage.

Discussion Questions

1. Most women highly value female approval and friendship, relying upon each other for support and understanding. Is this true? Do contemporary women also mistrust, dislike, and act cruelly toward each other? Do women really judge each other harshly, hold grudges, and gossip about each other? If so, how is it done?
2. "How much progress have we really made?" Name instances in which women have been "catty," cruel, or excluding of you. Has it happened recently? Think about times when you may have acted this way toward other women. Did you recognize it at the time? Was it intentional? What was to be gained by that behavior? Do you avoid confrontation with women you perceive as "bitchy," more successful, and hostile? Or do you seek it out? Why?
3. Does the success of another woman (in the arenas of career, family, homemaking, hobbies, and interests) leave you feeling energized, indifferent, or inadequate? Does the similar success of a man inspire the same reaction? Why might there be a difference?
4. Envy vs. Competitiveness -- which is the more destructive impulse? Tanenbaum argues that they are not the same -- is she right? Does envy leave open the possibility of cooperation? Does competitiveness feed an underlying need for superiority and a winner? Can either of these be funneled constructively? Are behaviors on either end of this spectrum identifiable in your own life or in the lives of friends, co-workers, and peers? Which is the more prevalent impulse in your life -- envy or competition?
5. Is the idea of universal sisterhood valid? Do women as a whole have a common goal? Are we working together toward it? Is competition between women ever acceptable when one person must be on the losing end? Does competition undermine the progress of the Women's Movement?
6. Tanenbaum is a firm believer that women are not more inherently competitive than men. She says the restrictive gender roles and newfound freedoms are the catalyst for negative competition. Do you feel particularly restricted as a woman? Is there a limit to the goals you can achieve and is this limit caused by the low goals you set for yourself?
7. American women seem to have a long-standing obsession with body image. How are your attitudes about physical fitness, "working out," and being in shape related to the amount of time you spend at the gym or exercising? Do you use physique as a way to gage the importance, validity, or desirability of another woman? Is this a fair criterion for judgment-making?
8. Does the way girls are taught to engage in competition with boys differ from how they are taught to compete with girls? Does internalizing failure lead to more heated personal drive for success or does it teach girls to shy away from competition because of the negative feelings it may cause? Can anyone lose gracefully? How can we teach girls to do so?
9. Is the "pink ghetto" a myth? Are women really steered toward career paths that place them in offices as secretaries and in classrooms as teachers? Are women working against each other for the prize of jobs that ultimately pay less to women than they do to men? Are women competing for "petty power" rather than "real power"?
10. Do you perceive women to be on equal footing with men in the workplace? If chauvinism exists, what effect might it have on the relationships between women in the office? Are women's groups and women's associations valid or are they examples of reverse discrimination? Do they further the Women's Movement or do they undermine the autonomy and talents of women as weak?
11. Do you feel that women are pressured or expected to be nice in the workplace? Are they more deferential to fellow colleagues as well as to employees they manage? Do you know women in high-powered positions or who carry great responsibility and are thought of as bitchy or manly because of their management style?

About the Author

Leora Tanenbaum is a New York-based freelance writer who focuses on the unique problems facing girls and women. Her articles have appeared in *Seventeen*, *Ms.*, *The Nation*, *Salon*, and many others.