

# Karren Brady: ‘I’ve never walked away from anything – and I’m not going to start now’



‘The toughest thing about being a success is you’ve got to keep on being one’ ... Brady.

The embattled West Ham CEO and Apprentice star says she is a champion of women’s rights. So why is she happy to work with men who are notorious for undermining them?

5 Karren Brady is immaculate, her hair perfectly coiffed, exuding warmth and confidence. She directs me to her equally immaculate office at West Ham United, the football club where she is the vice-chairman. Brady sits behind the desk, a Warholesque print of West Ham legend Bobby Moore above her, a laptop in front, and a huge flatscreen TV with rolling news on the wall. Her world seems perfectly composed. [You would never guess Brady’s football club is in meltdown](#) and fans are calling for her head.

10 At 48, and a quarter of a century after becoming [Birmingham City’s CEO](#), she is still known as “the first lady of football”. But, of course, there is much more to Brady than football – numerous business interests (last July, she became chair of Philip Green’s Taveya retail empire); [her position as a Tory peer in the House of Lords](#); an outspoken column for the Sun; [aide to Lord Sugar on The Apprentice](#); mother of two grown children; and champion of women in the workplace. It is in this last capacity that we meet.

15 Brady has just made a timely TV programme about the gender pay gap. She examines the nature of unconscious bias (how primary schoolchildren distinguish between women’s jobs and men’s jobs, and how employers tend to choose men over women even when they have the same CVs), why women are often paid less for work of equal value, why women can’t ask for more money but men can, and, perhaps most importantly, how working mothers are discriminated against.

20 Before we start, Brady reaches for her iPhone. “Can I send my daughter a text? She wants me to give her a call. I think she’s had a promotion at work.” She taps away at supersonic speed, then looks up. “Right. So. Have you seen the programme? What did you think of it?”

25 This is the woman who has everything: brilliant businesswoman, TV star and supermum. She glances at her huge gold watch. I sense the timer is running.

The programme is a powerful exploration of gender inequality at work, and makes me wonder how she challenges some of the male attitudes she comes across in the boardroom.

30 One of her missions in the documentary is to teach women how to ask for a pay rise – she tells viewers she only agreed to appear on The Apprentice so long as nobody was paid more than her.

It's amazing you get paid as much as Sugar, I say, seeing as it's basically his show. She looks embarrassed. "No, no. I think that came across completely wrong. I did point that out to the makers, actually. Alan is obviously the main person on the show. I meant the roles that are equal to mine – I wouldn't accept being paid less."

35 Brady grew up in Edmonton, north London. Her Irish father Terry was a self-made, Rolls-Royce driving millionaire, who made his fortune in property and printing. Her Italian mother, Rita, was a full-time mum. She was sent to an all-girls Catholic boarding school, which she hated. "You do what you're told, you wear what you're told, you eat what you're told, you go to bed when you're told." It made her ambitious for a different life, she says. "I was sick of being told what to do. The  
40 one thing I wanted was independence. And I realised to have that independence, you needed financial independence." After passing nine O-levels, she left to join the sixth form of a former all-boys school – one of only six girls. She left with four A-levels, but decided she wanted to make money rather than go to university. She joined Saatchi & Saatchi at 18, then went to work for LBC, where she targeted her father's client, David Sullivan, to advertise with the radio station.

45 He placed £2m worth of advertising with LBC. Before long, Sullivan headhunted her, bought Birmingham City at her instigation, and, when she was 23, made her CEO. Sullivan bought the club for £700,000 in 1993, and sold it in 2009 for £82m. Much of Brady's wealth is thought to date back to the sale of the club. By the time she left, 75% of senior management were women.

50 In the documentary, Brady says the most difficult obstacle facing women at work is returning after maternity leave. After the birth of her first child, she took only three days' leave. Although many women regard her as a fantastic role model, some would say she succeeded not by championing women's rights and needs but by hurdling them. Did she feel she had to "man-up" to stand a chance? "It's not language that I would use. I just felt this overwhelming sense of responsibility  
55 that I had to be there, and I couldn't let people down and I had to bring up a child. And it just manifested itself in very little maternity leave. It's something I deeply regret. It's not something I would ever encourage."

A few years ago she said she would never take a year's maternity leave – the amount women are legally entitled to – and that "There would be no CEO, I think, that would take a year off." Have  
60 her views changed since then? "No, because I could not take a year off. I wish I'd taken more time than I did, but not a year." Does she still believe that no CEO would ever take a year off? She insists she does not remember saying that, and that it is up to the individual.

I get up to go. She is thinking about the future – what's left to conquer. "I'm not looking to be a Cabinet minister. I don't want to be an MP, I don't want to be mayor of London." Why not mayor?  
65 "Because at the moment I have too much on." She pauses. There's a twinkle in her eye, and the warmth has returned. "Maybe that's an ambition for the future," she says.

*Why Do Men Earn More Than Women? is at 10pm on 4 April, Channel 5*

[Simon Hattenstone](#) Sun 25 Mar 2018