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ELLE DECOR



The Scarlet A

In Leslie Bennetts' long career interviewing famous women, only one—one—has ever admitted to being ambitious. Why are women so afraid to say they want power and so unwilling to plot a course to get it?

By [Leslie Bennetts](#) | December 16, 2010 11:00 a.m.

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Here's an experiment: Ask the most successful woman you know whether she's ambitious. Chances are that her reaction will recall the faux feminine coyness of Miss Piggy, the Muppet who'd flutter her eyelashes and simper "Moi?" at such a question—even as she aimed a lethal karate chop to get you out of her way.

Over the past three decades, I've interviewed some of the world's most celebrated women: queens and princesses, senators and rock stars, moguls and movie legends, first ladies and fashion titans. Some were barracudas whose appetite for power would make Machiavelli look like a pushover, but only one ever owned up to being ambitious. Soon after Catherine Zeta-Jones married Michael Douglas, I met her at their baronial apartment overlooking Central Park West. Waving a hand bedecked with a diamond as big as a grape, Zeta-Jones gestured toward the mantel, where her husband's Academy Awards were displayed, and confided that she wasn't satisfied with his reflected glory. "I want my Oscar up there too," she said, her dark eyes glittering with determination.



Photo: Robert Mora/Getty Images

That shouldn't have seemed shocking; for a film actress, an Oscar is the ultimate recognition (and Zeta-Jones soon won her own). But in all my years interviewing movie stars, nobody had ever admitted to coveting one.

Instead, I've listened to countless famous women deny they were ambitious, at least for themselves, although many allowed as how they wouldn't mind accomplishing worthy things on behalf of others. Even those whose names were household words claimed to have no interest in power. *Power?* Eek! The very word elicited such alarm that you'd think I was prying into some shameful secret.

Nor am I the only journalist to observe such reactions; to hear many women tell it, their careers are propelled mainly by coincidence and good fortune. "Things sort of happened," said Drew Gilpin Faust when *The New York Times* asked how she became the first woman president of Harvard University. When Jennifer Granholm was asked by *The Detroit Free Press* where she gets the energy that helped her become governor of Michigan, she replied, "I don't know. Lucky, I guess."

Whatever their level of attainment, women typically portray themselves as passive and reactive rather than as game-changers—as if their success flowed from outside forces rather than their own ability to pursue clear goals effectively. Men have less trouble owning up to their intentions, not to mention formulating them in the first place. One survey showed that 46 percent of male political candidates, versus 28 percent of female ones, agreed with the statement "It was entirely my idea to run." Another study demonstrated that women are also more likely than men to attribute agency to others: Twenty-two percent of women but only 14 percent of men said, "I had not seriously thought about running until someone else suggested it to me."

Listen to the way Hillary Clinton described her reaction when Barack Obama asked her to become his secretary of state: "I was stunned," Clinton told a women's magazine. "I really was very unconvinced.... I just really had a lot of doubts, and I kept suggesting other people. 'Well, how about this person! How about that person!'"

Even when they reach the top, women balk at owning their success. "I don't think of myself as a

businesswoman,” [Oprah](#) told Fortune—a remarkable statement coming from the richest self-made woman in America and the country’s first black billionaire.

Former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice couldn’t even acknowledge her own intelligence. “You graduated from high school when you were 15. At what point did you know you were a very smart girl?” Oprah asked her in *O* magazine.

“Never,” said Rice.

“But isn’t there a part of you that knows you’re very smart?” Oprah protested.

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Being a woman in her early thirties with the wants and dreams of motherhood, I continue to question my role in society... who I should be...? Is marriage in my future? Am I too ambitious? I've said to men I'd give it all up... but would I? And more importantly, should I give it all up for children? The famous conclusion I came to last week while in Bangkok, Thailand? i landed in Bangkok... exhausted, forlorn, and questioning under extreme fatigue from my long flight? What am I doing this all for? My conclusion? I'm willing to do motherhood by myself. I'm going to give myself five years. If I don't meet that partner, it's okay now. The pressure I don't feel is resolved. They say it takes a village... and the friends and mentors and loved ones I have to help raise a child are vast. This will be a child of the United Nations epitome. The bottom line is, after reading your article, not only did I get chills running up and down my spine, but I felt validated as a woman, an international business... who still enjoys gender roles.... that it's okay for me to be me, for me to be ambitious... and all that I've dreamed of where the grass is always greener ie: marriage and children.... needs to be redefined... at least for me... and it's finally okay that I do this by myself... the pressure is gone to convince these NY and international toxic bachelors that I'm a great catch and I'm not too much for them..... Thank you Leslie. You rock.

Posted by: Thank you. | 12/16/2010

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