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Negotiating with Sister Courage for the Balance of Power and the Power of Balance

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Gloria Feldt, author of *No Excuses*

In my early work as a professional coach I latched on to the national conversation around work-life balance. It was a good niche with a never-ending funnel of women desperate to solve the riddle of purposeful living and working.

Just below the surface, each and every woman I worked with was befuddled about her intrinsic value, unsure of her strengths and talents, and even more befuddled about how that knowing these things could possibly make a difference in her day-to-day life.

The sheer volume of family and work obligations pointed ceaselessly toward issues of productivity—bad habits around phone calls, email, scheduling and the ever-popular knee jerk yes—all fueled by desires of accomplishment and advancement in one's career, and perfection in mothering and family relationships. It was clear, however, that productivity was simply the symptom of a larger problem—our inability to exercise our power and speak up.

Armed with new self-awareness and new practices and tools, my clients set off with teeth-grinding resolve only to land weeks or months later in a heap of exhaustion and resentment. I became cranky and unhappy with my niche. *Why weren't these smart, educated, over-achieving,*

madly talented women taking their power back?

Then the *Aha!* I was seeking hit me. Power, and power's four-letter sister, negotiation, were two foreign words in the female lexicon. In her ground-breaking book [No Excuses](#), author and feminist activist [Gloria Feldt](#) writes that because women are culturally conditioned to reference externally for power (and permission) and to accommodate the needs of others, and say yes when we mean no, we've lost access to our own inner keel.

Though the power to define our own lives and the power to accomplish whatever we want to achieve might be right there and available to us [...] to be able to use power, you first have to know you have it.

In my quest to help women claim their power, we have to backpedal to a mere 14 months ago when I asked my now business partner Victoria Pynchon, a lawyer and mediator, to co-teach a course in [negotiation](#) for my community of women. After five trainings and countless workshops and speaking engagements (including an upcoming [retreat](#)), we knew we had tapped into a solution that could not only change the work-life-balance conversation, but give women the power to eliminate the wage gap one by one, and earn their place at the table both culturally and politically.

In truth, negotiation is easy to learn and easy to teach. Power, however, is not so easily taught or embraced and requires not only a rewiring of its meaning, but a willingness to inquire deeply within, and ruthlessly unwind our personal stories.

Feldt masterfully provides an opening roadmap and a new definition women can wrap their hearts and hands around.

Power, through most of human history, has been a concept rooted in brute force, the power-over something or someone. Because women have usually been among those over whom the powerful rule, it's no wonder that when we think about power we imagine the negatives.

She goes on to say that as soon as we begin to talk about changing the definition of power from *power-over* to *power-to*—the power to accomplish things in this world, the power to make life better, the power to create new things—women relax.

To fold balance back into this context, we now have to marry power with negotiation, and by that I mean the kind of negotiation where everyone wins. Interest-based negotiation. The reason is simple: to claim our power and get what we want and what we're worth in every area of life we have to find our vocal chords. We have to ask. And that, as Feldt says, takes courage.

When we talk about giving women an equal chance to succeed at work, we're talking about setting seriously big goals and going for them as a group by making the business case for change in a forthright and persistent manner. When we talk about getting more women elected or appointed to public office, we're talking about creating networks to deliver the votes. Sometimes dealing with the tough issues within a relationship takes the most courage of all.

What's most important in this new paradigm, in our new skin as askers, leaders and change makers, we get to do what we women have done for centuries and that is to build relationships and create community—the kind of community in which we all have each other's backs.

In both our onsite workshops and our virtual training, we had no idea how strong both the need and desire would be for hearing and telling our stories, and just how much support and encouragement women would require making such life changing choices. This is what Feldt

calls “Sister Courage.”

[...]We’re talking about a concept that allows us to become bigger and stronger than the sum of the parts. We can be a movement. Joining together as a movement in Sister Courage, and with brother partners of like mind (and there are many!) enables us to accomplish great things we could never do as isolated individuals.

The door is open, women. Step through it and bring your sisters with you.

Hear Gloria Feldt in action June 30 in Santa Barbara for [“Courage: Changing the Way Women Think About Power.”](#)