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Women's roadblock to power: themselves

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In her new book, No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power, author Gloria Feldt says the time is ripe for women to reach full gender equality, if only they would seize it

At a time when women outnumber men at college and university campuses, and when the numbers of men and women in the work force have reached parity, why are women still earning less than their male counterparts and under-represented in management positions?

In her new book, *No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power*, U.S. author Gloria Feldt says no one is holding women back in the workplace but themselves. Ms. Feldt, former chief executive officer and president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, tells The Globe and Mail the time is ripe for women to reach full gender equality, if only they would seize it.

How are women holding themselves back?

I'm not sure that we know that it's our moment as much as the rest of the world knows it's our moment. You can see the signs of it every day. You see it in studies that show companies that have a critical mass of women on their boards of directors or their management teams have better returns on investment. And you see it in marketers, who know that women buy 85 per cent of their goods, and so they go all out to attract women to what they're selling. But women don't know the power that they hold in their hands. We need to see it.

How do women hinder themselves on an individual level, like when it comes to asking for a pay raise?

There are behaviours that we have learned that we have not yet given up. I refer to them as 'the baby elephant behaviours,' from the fact that when baby elephants are trained, they learn when they're tethered to a post, they can't get away from it. And once they're fully grown animals, they have plenty of strength to uproot the post, but they don't. I think women, to some extent, have learned the behaviour that we're tethered to the post of cultural barriers

Women don't negotiate as aggressively for their first salary ... When you add it up, the surveys show that costs women, on average, a half a million dollars in their lifetime.

How can women make demands or be assertive without being perceived as pushy?

Just as it's hard to build a bicycle while you're riding on it, it's hard to change a culture while you're living in it. Women are still judged more harshly than men on several counts. If we are assertive, we're called aggressive. If we're aggressive, we're called words that aren't very nice. On the other hand, we all know that to speak up for yourself, you sometimes have to be aggressive. Part of the answer is just not to be afraid of being viewed negatively.

You mention that women need to redefine their sense of power. What's the difference between how men and women define power?

When people think about power, they tend to think about having the power over other people ...

Women, generally, when you talk to them about power, their first instinct is to resist the notion because they're thinking about the old paradigm of 'power over,' and it is certainly true that women have borne the brunt of the negative aspects of power for millennia. But once I start talking to women about defining power as the 'power to' - the power to accomplish something good in this world, the power to have a better life for yourself and your family - I see their faces relax and they can accept that kind of power.

'Power over' is oppressive; "power to" is true leadership, and it's a very positive thing and it's a leadership style that women are much more attuned to. For example, women typically will not run for office just to run for office, but if they see an injustice, if something is happening to their child in their school system that they don't like, that woman will run for the school board.

You say women like Ann Coulter, Margaret Thatcher and Sarah Palin 'carry out the agenda of patriarchy to a fault.' Do they help or hurt gender equality?

It is, in the aggregate, always a good thing to have women in such position because the more boys and girls see women in positions of power, the more normal it becomes. But when women in power simply emulate the amoral power tactics that men have used over the years, that is not creating transformational change.

Margaret Thatcher clearly succeeded in being more warlike, more of what you assume men are going to be like ... And similarly, Sarah Palin plays right into image of an attractive woman and uses that - which is a power, to be sure. But also, she supports many of the policies that hurt women instead of help them. For example, she's opposed to reproductive rights.

If a woman is simply supporting the same old worn-out policies that have not been successful for us in our culture, well, what good is that?

But since women have such divergent interests and politics, how much should they stick together and support each other?

The way that I look at it, if there are two candidates - a male and a female - and they are more or less equally qualified and they're fairly well matched in terms of their qualifications, then I will choose to support the woman, until women have reached parity. At that point, it will matter less.

You suggest that women who have risen in their careers and then choose to stay at home aren't doing other women any favours. Yet many would argue that their choice is good for them and is good for their family.

I look at it from the standpoint of not blaming people, but inspiring people to understand that we all have an obligation to each other to continue the forward advancement of women, that we're in the middle of an unfinished revolution, an unfinished transformation.

What I'm really saying is we have an obligation to our sisters to try to help, and it does set women back when large numbers of us choose not to use the skills we have attained. Sixty per cent of college graduates are women now and I think this past year, women began to get an equal number of PhDs to men. So if you don't then use that education to continue advancing the status of women, then you are, in effect, setting back women over all.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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