



9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power

by [Nicole N.](#) || October 1, 2010

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*Editor's Note: We're so thrilled to be able to bring you an excerpt from [No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power](#) by Gloria Feldt. [Gloria](#) is a nationally renowned activist and author whose passion for social justice has propelled her life's work. Her previous books include the New York Times bestseller *Send Yourself Roses*, coauthored with actress Kathleen Turner, *Behind Every Choice Is a Story*, and *The War on Choice*. She is former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America.*

Sister Courage Wears the Shirt of Action by Gloria Feldt for Care2

- What makes you angry enough to take action?
- What makes you inspired enough to take action?

"I love your T-shirt," chuckled Jenny, my twentysomething personal trainer, as she stretched my aching legs. "I never saw that before."

I hadn't noticed which of my many message T-shirts I had thrown on when I rolled out of bed before sunrise. Most of the folks who populate New York's Columbus Circle Equinox gym sport workout clothes that bear designer labels, but seldom do I see any that pack a message punch. I figure my chest is valuable real estate — why not use it to communicate my convictions?

I looked down and saw that I'd grabbed one of my favorites: Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's wry observation became one of the guiding principles of the women's movement during the 1970s, and living it seems as natural to me now as balance ball crunches do to my lithe trainer.

Perhaps because of their delicious candor laced with felicity of expression, these words have become a slogan for boundary-breaking women everywhere. But just because it's proudly emblazoned on mugs and bumper stickers and, yes, T-shirts, doesn't mean we should let the message be reduced to merely a

personal assertion of gutsiness. The context of Ulrich's observation, the thing that actually makes it true, is both personal and political. Although history is often taught in schoolbooks as a sequence of significant acts by Important Men (and the occasional important woman), what Ulrich recognized is that making history is a communal act, requiring us to break the boundaries of what is considered proper behavior.

And she's certainly not the only one. When Rosa Parks refused to take a seat at the back of the bus, she became a hero — a symbol of the civil rights movement's then-new direct activism — because she refused to be well behaved anymore.

It was an individual act, but Parks was also part of a larger movement, one of a burgeoning group of people who were collectively refusing to behave according to rules they considered unjust. People who kept the pot stirring and the important issues front and center. Her seemingly individual act in turn sparked thousands of other women and men, long discriminated against, to take their rightful seats at the front of the bus, at lunch counters, in classrooms, and in their own minds.

Individual women who break rules may sometimes galvanize those around them to action. But just as often, even when we summon the courage to act alone, we are punished or shamed for our so-called transgressions against propriety or "nature." Shame is a powerful mechanism for controlling people. It can stop you cold, make you question your worth, silence you. It can make you feel like you need to make excuses for yourself just for being, but especially so if you're transgressing some custom, even if you feel certain it should be transgressed because isn't right or just.

When women come together and collectively decide to stop being well behaved — to shuck the shame and have the courage to stand up for ourselves, with our sisters — then that's a movement. Banding together to speak our truth and effect change allows us to get through the barriers of shame and fear, as well as barriers of law and custom. Together we're a force to reckon with — and people might as well get out of our way.

For example, when you're up against a work-life balance problem that requires changing a long-used process — perhaps you're trying to change a policy like creating flextime, ensuring sick leave, or getting more women onto the executive team — you can, to a limited extent, improve your situation independently of others by negotiating your own terms of employment. But that won't alter the underlying structure that perpetuates the problem. If you want to change the system, you need to function like a movement.

I learned about building a movement on the front lines of a great one — the reproductive justice movement. It has overcome epic challenges to fight for the individual woman's rights and health.

From my experience in social movements, I've taken away three simple principles of movement building that can produce wildly successful results for women who want to live an unlimited life. They apply to any aspect of life and leadership, whether in work, politics and civic engagement, or personal life. I call them Sister Courage. Be a sister. Have courage. Put the two together and act with Sister Courage to create a movement, or join a movement that exists to do the work that stokes your passion.

What are you angry enough or inspired enough about to create a movement? Or to join an existing movement? What's on your shirt?

From the book [*No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think about Power*](#) by [Gloria Feldt](#). Excerpted by arrangement with Seal Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group, Copyright © 2010.