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Excerpt from "No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power"

by Gloria Feldt

From the book [No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think about Power](#) by author, activist and former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, [Gloria Feldt](#). Excerpted by arrangement with Seal Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright (c) 2010.

Note: In this excerpt I look at how reproductive and economic justice intertwine in women's lives, and why both are necessary to the power to lead unlimited lives. With anti-choice forces mounting ballot initiatives to grant personhood to fertilized eggs thus implicitly denying personhood to women, this bit of history is especially relevant. I also chose it for Feminist.com readers to invite you to join the conversation on my [9 Ways blog](#). This week, we're talking about the first of the 9 Ways power tools: "Know your history and you can create the future of your choice." I'd love to know whether you agree and what women you'd like to write into the history books.

Barefoot and Pregnant = Abused

Keeping a woman "barefoot and pregnant" is the epitome of destroying her power as an individual. That's why the words have so often been uttered in the same breath. When a woman is perpetually pregnant, she can't enter the paid workforce, and that leaves her barefoot (i.e., without her own financial means). Conversely, when a woman is prevented from earning money, she can't tell the jerk to go jump in the lake if she lacks the financial means to support herself and the children. She's hobbled as surely as Chinese women of old with bound feet, and for exactly the same reason. She's trapped, controlled, powerless; she can't get away.

Yet the figure of speech drew a roaring laugh in 1963—when the pill was still new—at the then all-male Optimist Club in Little Rock when Arkansas State Senator Paul Van Dalsem railed against uppity members of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), who'd had the temerity to lobby the state legislature for improved educational opportunities for African Americans.

"We don't have any of these university women in Perry County, but I'll tell you what we do up here when one of our women starts poking around in something she doesn't know anything about. We get her an extra cow," fulminated Van Dalsem, who, by the way, also opposed desegregation and voting rights. "If that don't work, we give her a little more garden to tend. And if that's not enough, we get her pregnant and keep her barefoot."

His fighting words did not go unanswered by the women of Perry County, who rightly interpreted them as not just retrograde, but also suggestive of rape. They began to carry signs that said, "We've been pregnant—by choice, not by force."

Their point was good, but it didn't go far enough. Van Dalsem's formula was a denial of the basic right to determine what happens to a woman's body. This threat has such deep resonance because it has profound roots in our culture, where only relatively recently in history have women won the basic components of legal selfhood.

Up through the end of the nineteenth century, coverture marriage was the legal paradigm that defined a woman's relationship to her husband. As described in William Blackstone's legal dictionary, the central text of the time, "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing."

By 1963, coverture had long since ceased to be the legal model for marriage contracts. But the lingering effects of this law remained in the way that women's liberties have been considered legally and socially. For instance, for years many state laws did not acknowledge the possibility that a married woman could be raped by her husband. The first state to outlaw marital rape was South Dakota, in 1975. North Carolina, the last state to change its law, did not do so until 1993.

Those women in Perry County who protested Van Dalsem's slur were at the forefront of a movement to draw attention to a problem that had everything to do with women's power and control over our own lives. It was a movement that culminated with the 1994 passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

Although domestic violence and violence against women are now topics that are openly, if not always accurately, addressed—think of Rihanna and Chris Brown—these issues remain potent. There are recent reports of male partners obsessed with controlling women by controlling their sexuality in two seemingly antithetical ways: First are "coerced pregnancies," in which the man forbids a woman to use birth control so that she is more likely to become pregnant, thus remaining vulnerable; second is the unfortunate truth that once a woman becomes pregnant, she is more at risk of being beaten or even murdered than she would be if she were not pregnant.

Not just a little, but a lot has changed since Van Dalsem's 1963 pronouncement, and it has changed with stunning rapidity thanks to the organized and persistent work of those uppity women's advocacy groups that opened door after door of opportunity for women.

We're accustomed now to seeing women in almost every role in our society—at least one woman. Today a Sandra Day O'Connor would get snapped up by a top law firm rather than relegated to secretary, but that doesn't automatically put her into the partner's boardroom. And ballot initiatives that would give personhood rights to fertilized eggs but not to women are heating up.

Changing laws isn't easy, but changing the culture and individual behavior is infinitely more difficult. That's the part we have to do for ourselves.

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