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Time To Change How We Think About Power

By Gloria Feldt



Google “women and power conference” and you’ll get over 50 million results. Google “men and power conference” and you get 49 million. But a quick scan through the top-ranked conferences tells you that the majority of the latter are actually conferences about women and power that happen to mention men.

Full disclosure: I have attended many such events, including a few years back the invitation-only [Fortune Most Powerful Women Summit](#) during my 40 years of activism for women. I believe in celebrating successes along the bumpy path to equality, and my new book, [No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power](#), exhorts women to embrace their power and blast through the doors now open to us. I want women to reach parity while I’m still alive to see it. But at the rate we’re going, that will take 70 years.

Women are 60 percent of college graduates, 50 percent of the workforce, and yet according to the White House Project, constitute a mere 18 percent of the top leadership roles across all sectors of business and political office. So I get a bit testy about the proliferation of conferences that exist to puff up women’s egos around how powerful we are yet have no agenda to break through the remaining barriers, advance women who are not so powerful, or even to use their positions systematically to bring other women through the doors we’ve struggled to open.

Some remaining barriers are external. For example, hiring officials often assume resumes bearing women’s names represent less competence than the same resume with a man’s name attached, and the physical appearance of women running for political office comes under greater media scrutiny than that of men. Still, in my research, I found that with legal barriers down and almost every position having seen a “first woman,” most of the barriers that remain are culturally induced. They are lodged now within ourselves and how women think about and engage with power in our own lives.

To *Fortune’s* credit, they live-streamed this year’s Most Powerful Women Summit, which took place on October 5-6, making the keynote speeches available to the powerful and not-so-powerful alike. Still, everyone knows the value of these conferences is not in the speeches but the spaces in between, not in the conference rooms but in the hallways, ladies’ rooms, and social events.

The problem is equal parts how the self-proclaimed cultural arbiters like media giants *Forbes* and *Fortune* define women's power and how women allow themselves to be co-opted by accepting as gold standard the definitions of power those entities create when they produce their top power lists.

Forbes magazine published its [Most Powerful Women](#) list this month too. This year they ranked Michelle Obama at the top. She has powerful arms and is married to the most powerful man on earth. But does that make her powerful? It gives her power, to be sure, yet she has not chosen to use that power to be a policy leader like Eleanor Roosevelt, or even a role model to the many women struggling for work/life balance as Jill Biden is doing. She's designated herself the Mom-in-Chief, and in that role she has taken on laudable but non-controversial causes such as childhood obesity.

Has a man ever made a most powerful list simply because he is married to a powerful woman? I can hear chortles at the very thought.

Forbes ranks women in part according to their "buzz factor." That's about who you know and whether you are mentioned in the A-list places—how others regard not so much your work or accomplishments but your cultural attractiveness, reiterating the tired message that women are arm candy rather than leaders. That's how Hillary Clinton and Lady Gaga are ranked almost equally—a juxtaposition simultaneously laughable and outrageous.

Which again points to the fact that there exists a "most powerful women" list when no such list exists for men. These lists reinforce the idea that when it comes to power there are people and there are women. Women remain separate but definitely not equal.

Forbes' real list, its "[most powerful people in the world](#)" list, includes just three women out of 67 individuals (two of whom are popularly known in puerile fashion by their first names: Hillary is #17 and Oprah #45; Angela Merkel made #15). Apparently the list-makers assume men are inherently powerful while women are waiting in the wings for power to be bestowed upon them based on how loudly the buzz meter clangs when their names are called.

In my research, I found that women have an ambivalent relationship with power. Clearly, though, ambivalence about powerful women is also reflected in the ways women are regarded within the culture—a sure-fire reason if not an excuse for Michelle Obama's reticence to take on more controversial topics.

But it's up to women to resist being co-opted by the shower of "you are powerful" affirmations lavished by media like *Forbes* and *Fortune*. At this critical moment when nearly all of the external barriers to women's achievement have been removed, we've proven that we can play by the men's rules and master the game when we need to. But too often, in our pursuit of success, we've failed to question the rules themselves.

Until women are willing to embrace power, and define it on our own terms as the expansive power to accomplish what we think needs to be done in this world rather than a reflection of the approbation of others, we will remain stuck in our half-finished revolution. Rejecting the

outdated oppressive model of power, what I call “power-over” and in its place setting forth the transformational leadership idea of the power to (to accomplish good things in the world and for oneself) will allow women to lead powerful lives that are not determined by *Forbes*’—or anyone else’s—judgments about the merit of our buzz factor.

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