



Thank Goodness Kamala Harris Is Ambitious, And Why That's Good for You

You knew it would happen. As soon as Harris was named as Biden's running mate, the word ambitious was used to undermine rather than praise her character. In this episode, Gloria makes a case for why we should once and for all rid ourselves of this double-standard and has some choice advice for how to keep yourself grounded in the power of your own ambition.

Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, ambition is the fuel. Intention uses that fuel to fly into action. Hello, and welcome to Power to You. I'm Gloria Feldt, cofounder and president of Take the Lead, and I'm here with secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional life. I cofounded Take the Lead because I figured out how to crack the code that has been holding women back from equal leadership and pay. My mission is for women and men to hold equal power, equal pay, and equal leadership positions by 2025. At the end of each podcast, I'll always share some very specific tips that will help you lead and succeed, so stay tuned.

It was so predictable. Any woman who had the audacity to run for president must be too ambitious, said the wagging tongues and talking heads. Ambitious when applied to a woman becomes an epithet. Applied to a man, it isn't just a compliment, it's an assumption. Why wouldn't he be ambitious? How else would he get ahead? On the other hand, why would she be ambitious? There must be something wrong. Something sinister about her.

So, it didn't surprise me at all when the minute Joe Biden announced Kamala Harris as his vice presidential pick, she was attacked for being not even too ambitious, but simply for being ambitious, period. Well, whopty doo. I should hope that she and every woman is ambitious. Because you see, the problem isn't with her. The problem is with a culture that punishes women for being ambitious even as it rewards men for those exact same behaviors. It's the phenomenon psychologists call stereotype threat. When you break your culture's gender stereotype, and every culture has them, you cause cognitive dissonance. You upset the prevailing expectations for your behavior as a man or as a woman, and

you're likely to be treated badly. You may be publicly attacked, ostracized, mocked.

Some Biden supporters [reportedly tried to get Harris dumped from the ticket, fearing that she would be "too ambitious."](#) and might, gasp, aspire to become president. Oh, really? And hasn't Biden himself been blatantly, transparently ambitious about wanting to be president for the last, oh, maybe 30 years? But apparently that doesn't count because he's a man. And after all, men are supposed to be ambitious. His supporters, who have their britches in a wad over Harris, are so blinded by their own implicit biases that they can't even see the irony of their allegations against Harris, nor can they see the deeply-ingrained acceptance by just about everyone of the fact that the women in Biden's life have spent their lives supporting his ambition.

His sister, Valerie [Biden Owens, ran all of his senate campaigns and his previous campaign for president.](#) She serves as a senior advisor to his 2020 campaign. Biden Owens credits his late wife, Neilia, [as being the energy behind his first U.S. Senate race,](#) and certainly his wife now, Jill Biden, plays the perfect supportive spouse even as she sets a new standard for prospective first ladies by saying she'll keep her job as a community college professor.

But you see, that's all okay, because the women are all supporting players, rather than the candidate. It's such a pervasive gender bias that no one even notices the pattern. As they say, fish can't see the water they swim in. But when a bright, accomplished, ambitious woman like Harris aspires to be California Attorney General, then Senator, then President of the United States, and now Joe Biden's running mate, she's judged to be too ambitious. It happens every day. It happens twice as often when the woman is Black, or Latina, or anything but white. So, the biracial Harris, who generally identifies as Black, has faced an extra share of disparaging comments about her ambition, and I say good for her for confronting them and remaining ambitious.

Danielle Winterhalter, a political consultant for SpeakEasy Political, told the Washington Post's [The Lily Column](#) that the problem is deep rooted. She says, "Seeing women in the forefront of the political arena is still something our society is becoming accustomed to, and whether folks like to admit it or not, it causes a decent amount of discomfort, and that discomfort is often quantified in terms like overly ambitious and quite sure of herself." Winterhalter adds that we really need to support women running, working, and getting involved at all levels of government to make our participation the norm.

The same is true in business and every other endeavor. This change will come when enough women are ambitious enough to seek leadership roles despite those biases. It will come when enough women achieve these roles and succeed at them. Nothing succeeds like success. This is also why I counsel women to take those corporate jobs when they're offered, even in troubled organizations, because while there is a risk of women being brought in when there are messes

to clean up and they may fail, I say go ahead. It's worth the risk to give it a try, especially if you feel like you are qualified.

Casting aspersions on women's ambition isn't new, and in my opinion, it is actually an intentional, though often unconscious, cultural pressure for women not to have high ambition. In good news that suggests the change in public opinion is already afoot, the latest research published by the American Psychologist finds that people now see women as ambitious as men. Harris is one of those ambitious women turning the characteristic into a culturally sanctioned good thing. During a live stream conversation for the Black Girls Lead 2020 Conference, Harris said to her young audience, "There will be resistance to your ambition. There will be people who say to you, "You're out of your lane." They are burdened by only having the capacity to see what has always been, instead of seeing what can be. But don't you let that burden you." And yes, she seeks power, and that's a good thing because it's for all the right reasons. Harris is the right sort of person to break up the prevailing stereotype threat, because she confounds every single racist trope. She's the American mosaic. You can't put her in a box and keep her there. She's a woman of multi cultures, a child of immigrants with a white Jewish husband whose children call her Momala, to boot. You can't get more apple pie American than that.

And isn't ambition one of the highest American values? Oh, you say, but not for a woman? Well, you know, it's just time to get over that. If for no other reason than the evidence is clearer every day that countries with female leaders by and large do better than those with male leaders. "Only 19 countries around the world are currently led by women," wrote Stéphanie Fillion in Forbes recently. According to Fillion, the leadership characteristics exhibited by those women seem to be the very ones that produce better results in curbing COVID-19. Big thinking, empathy, and good communication skills.

Dr. Uma Kambhampati, Professor of Economics at the University of Reading, and her colleague, Supriya Garikipati, Associate Professor of Development Economics at the University of Liverpool, decided to take a look at whether this statement was accurate or not. [Here's what they found](#). The initial hypothesis of the study was that in general, women tend to be more risk averse when it comes to decision making. However, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, they found that women were risk averse when it came to human lives, and as such, closed their country earlier than their male counterparts when they were seeing fewer deaths, but they were less risk averse when it came to risking the economy.

For Dr. Garikipati, there is a lot we can learn from the result of the study. She told Forbes that [women have been asked to be more like men to be successful](#), but perhaps it's time to ask men to abide by more female traits, such as empathy and clear communication. I mean, listen, have men, as much as we love them, done such a stellar job running the world? Maybe it's time for ambitious women to be put in charge of things for say the next 2,000 years.

Now, usually at the end of these podcasts I give you several tips in some detail. This time, I have just two, and they are brief.

1. First, be ambitious. Be as ambitious as you want to be. Be ambitious about your ambition. Don't let anyone rob you of your dreams or dissuade you from aspiring to achieve your heart's desire, or for using your talents for your highest and best intentions. The world needs you to be you.
2. And secondly, if someone says you're ambitious, just say, "Thank you."

Let me know how it goes for you. You can email me at any time at powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com. I love to know how you're faring. Until next week, Power to You.

Power to You is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is our head producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. For more about my work, please visit gloriafeldt.com, and follow me on social media @gloriafeldt. To learn about Take the Lead and our courses and coaching services, go to taketheleadwomen.com and follow Take the Lead on social media. You can also send me your comments about the show and your questions on leadership and power to powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com. Be sure to subscribe or follow Power to You on your favorite listening app, and you know you'd make me so happy if you would leave a review on Apple Podcasts, as those really help us get to know what you like about the show. Thank you.

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