



Speak Up About Women in the Media And Shape the Story

In the era of “fake news,” the power of the media to shape our understanding of reality is undeniable. Sexist news coverage is nothing new for women, but in an election year, it’s crucial we remain vigilant and outspoken. In this episode, Gloria urges us to be conscious, careful, and critical about women’s representation in the media and gives us concrete tips for how to recognize and leverage our own power to change the narrative.

Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, the media forms us as it informs us. Hello and welcome to Power to You. I’m Gloria Feldt, here with secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional lives. I co-founded 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, pay, and leadership positions by 2025. At the end of each podcast, I’ll share specific tips that will help you lead and succeed.

I’ve gotta tell you, I get so tired of people complaining to me about something they saw in the news coverage of women. Whether it’s criticizing or loving [Kamala Harris’s Chucks](#), or the [tone and timber of a female leader’s voice](#), and don’t get me started on Hillary Clinton’s ankles and yellow pantsuit. Women in leadership roles are scrutinized and stereotyped much more than men. That is surely true. But don’t tell me to write a letter to the editor. Goodness knows I do that often enough. You have a voice and a mouse. Use them.

Obi Ezekwesili, former World Bank Regional Director for Africa, and co-convener of #BringBackOurGirls, told several hundred professional women members of the International Women’s Forum meeting in Stockholm, “When you are as educated as women in this room, you are only voiceless by choice.” Obi and I are both saying you have the power to influence the representation of women, people of color, and any marginalized or underrepresented group. You have the power to set the record straight on issues that you think have been inaccurately reported, too. You can do it on your own, or better yet, by joining with some other people to make your point. Stay with me and I’ll give you some specific actions you can take.

And no, posting your outrage on Facebook or Twitter doesn’t count, although it might make you feel good for a minute. There needs to be some substance behind it. On the positive side of the media coverage, other than remarking in a celebratory way that Jane Fraser is a woman, most of the coverage of her being

tapped to become CEO of CitiCorp next February has been untarnished by commentary on her physical appearance. Fraser herself made some references about what I call [lead-like-a-woman characteristics](#) that one might guess were an answer to a question about how she might lead differently from her predecessors. But she framed the comments in a positive way and pivoted to what her business priorities will be.

From Fortune's Broadsheet, "[People do look for leadership at a time like this. Being a woman has real power and strength.](#)" Fraser told Fortune's Claire Zillman in May. "I can be much more vulnerable in certain areas, talking more about the human dimensions of this than some of my male colleagues feel comfortable with, and I don't feel that's in any way soft or weaker." Fraser said that her priorities for Citi are to, "Invest in our infrastructure, risk management, and controls, to ensure that we operate in a safe and sound manner and serve our clients and customers with excellence." End of that quotation. Now, that sounds pretty much like what any incoming CEO would say and the news reports that used it should be commended. I'd say that is progress.

I recently signed onto a letter alerting Arizona media that women are watching their coverage of women candidates in this election year, that we have the women's back, and we will let members of the media know if they have stepped into sexist reporting. I wouldn't ordinarily include the entire text, but it's really good and it covers the waterfront, and it could be as easily applied to how the media covers women in business or any profession as it does in this instance to political reporting about women. I'll also attach it in the show notes. Here goes:

"Recent history is replete with examples of sexist stereotypes and tropes seeping into news coverage that put political candidates who are women at a distinct disadvantage. We write to strongly encourage vigilance this election season about fair and equitable coverage of women running for office. Arizona has a proud history of women candidates and officeholders at every level. The 2020 election is no different, with an impressive, diverse roster of over 100 women running up and down the ballot. And with women representing half of the state's population, we feel obligated to raise your consciousness and to encourage decisions that reflect an intentional mindset to actively promote objective and unbiased news coverage."

"Please just deal with the substance of a campaign. Guard against descriptions of looks or ascribing certain traits. Like for example, ambitious seems to mean something different for women than for men. Media coverage over the years has perpetuated impressions of women and it is amplified with women of color. With the historic appointment of Kamala Harris as the Democratic vice presidential nominee, a group of prominent women shared their concerns and expectations with national media organizations about the media's role in the scrutiny and coverage of women candidates, and the vice presidential candidate in particular."

“We applaud the authors of the [We Have Her Back letter](#),” and that’s a national effort that went to media all over the country, “for highlighting examples of disparate treatment of women who are candidates for office. They include,” I bet you’ve seen some of these,” reporting on whether a woman is liked as though it is news, when the likability of men is never considered a legitimate news story. Reporting on relationships with partners, staff, or colleagues, by characterizing them differently if the woman is not seen as subservient or supportive. Reporting, even as asides in a story, on a woman’s looks, her weight, her tone of voice, attractiveness, and hair, is sexist news coverage unless the same analysis is applied to every candidate. Reporting on questions of electability is in itself a perpetuation of a stereotype about the ability of women to lead. Reporting on doubts that women may not be qualified leaders, even when they have experience equal to or exceeding male leaders. Reporting on the heritage of women of color perpetuates a misunderstanding about who is legitimately American. Reporting on and using pictures of a woman’s, particularly a Black woman’s, show of anger at injustice or any kind of passion in communication perpetuates racist tropes that suggest unfairly that women are too emotional or irrational in their leadership.”

The letter goes on to make an important distinction. It states, “Please don’t mistake this for a request for special treatment. Women are not fragile. All candidates can and must hold their own in a debate and before reporters. Rather, this is an opportunity for you to demonstrate thoughtfulness, fairness, and equity in your campaign coverage, and to advance our civic health. You have the public’s trust. As voters seek to understand those who are seeking office, we hope you will use your influence wisely.”

The media creates meaning for us about women, power, and leadership. Like I said, it forms us as it informs us, and representation matters a great deal in every medium. [The Women’s Media Center](#) tracks many metrics concerning women’s leadership or the lack of it in a wide range of media. Among them is the most recent report published in 2019 in which they found that editors of 135 of the most widely-read newspapers are overwhelmingly white and male. So, it’s not surprising that the coverage of women is skewed.

Here’s an example of the consequence of that. Soledad O’Brien said, when I interviewed her recently for a Take the Lead event, that a great deal of her energy and effort to combat racism in the newsroom had started when she was asked to host CNN’s series, *Black in America*, and she discovered a pretty astounding lack of knowledge and I would say cultural competence among her peers. In a television newsroom that was similar to the newspapers I just reported on, primarily white and male, she noticed that individuals of color were consistently described and framed with a focus on their deficits, whereas suburban white people were described by focusing first on their assets and their agency.

So, [it behooves us to seek out a range of media voices](#). For example, if you're white and you don't already subscribe to the [RaceAhead newsletter](#), consider doing so. Every edition is full of author Ellen McGirt's brilliant writing and topics you might not see in the mainstream media through a racial justice lens. She pulls no punches. Here's another example of why representation matters: If you can see it, you can be it. New York City's Central Park just got its first statues of women other than Mother Goose and Alice in Wonderland. On Women's Equality Day, August 26th, 2020, the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment of the United States Constitution granting women the right to vote, a women's rights statuary depicting three prominent 19th century women's rights activists was unveiled. It includes suffragists Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony.

Anthony, who was probably the best known, was convicted of voting illegally in 1872. Stanton co-founded the American Equal Rights Association and pushed for women's suffrage, even when Anthony thought it was too radical an idea to be accepted by the public. Truth, who was born enslaved in New York, says she walked away to freedom in 1826, and she became a well-known abolitionist and women's rights activist, as well as a Methodist minister. Now, when the statue was first conceived, it was going to be of Stanton and Anthony, but after successful protests that the role of Black women in the suffrage movement had been ignored, Truth was added. The result is [one of the most powerfully engaging statues](#) in the park, and it figures prominently on the iconic Poets Walk.

I have walked by the statue several times now and each time, it's been difficult to get an unimpeded photo because so many women, girls, and even men are taking selfies in front of it. Now, what can you learn from this to advance gender parity? What can you do to foster and champion gender and racial parity and a power to culture in a meaningful way? Here are a few tips:

1. First, what media do you most often consume, watch, read, listen to? Make a list and ask yourself whether you are by your actions supporting media that represents women and people of color accurately. All women, not just women like you.
2. Secondly, try this exercise. For one week, every day, pick out one example of media coverage that you think is fair and accurate about women, and pick out one that you think was not fair and accurate about women. What are the characteristics of your media examples that caused you to categorize them as either biased or fair to women?
3. And then, ask yourself what is one thing I can do to compliment the good journalism or call out the bad? Reporters respond to your feedback, and generally you can get their emails from the article or their bios in the media outlet. You can also tweet about it. If we would all do that on a regular basis, I guarantee you we would see changes.

4. Fourth, what is your own social media footprint? What can you do to deliver posts that consistently treat women fairly? And you know, it's still okay to call out some of those that don't, but try to focus on accentuating the positive.
5. Fifth, what new awareness did you get from this exercise in regard to your own stereotypes and implicit biases or those you experienced from others?
6. And finally, how can greater awareness of the media narratives that influence you make you a better leader? Think about that and then see what you can apply in your daily work life.

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

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