



Lessons from *On the Record*: How Sexual Violence is Costing Us Gender Parity in Leadership

This week, Gloria documents the long term impact sexual harassment, abuse, and assault have on women's minds, and as a result, on their lives, leadership aspirations, and careers. Focusing on the riveting documentary *On the Record* and on her conversation with the protagonist Drew Dixon, Gloria helps us understand why, despite the rise of the #MeToo movement,

we are far from understanding all we lose as a society when abuse and harassment rob women of realizing their full potential. She offers strategic leadership tips on using your voice in your everyday life to shift this power paradigm once and for all.

Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, listen to the voices of women and you will hear truths that may astound you, but they will set you free. Hello and welcome to Power to You. I'm Gloria Feldt, co-founder 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 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, 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.

This particular podcast has been one of the most challenging I have ever done, yet one of the most important. Maybe those two things go together, right? No pain, no gain, as they say. The topic I have been thinking about talking with you about for a while is best expressed by Drew Dixon. Drew is the former vice president of A&R at Arista Records, former director of A&R at Def Jam Recordings, former general manager of John Legend's label, HomeSchool Records, and former manager of recording artist Estelle. Pretty impressive, right?

Dixon produced hit records with artists ranging from Carlos Santana to Whitney Houston and many, many more. She is the founder of the independent label, The 9th Floor. Also of the tech-enabled beauty startup, EverythingDid, and the co-creator of the TV series, Reciprocity. Definitely an ambitious and intentional woman, who knew from her teenage years that a career in the music business was her dream. And yet, Dixon left the music industry she loved at the height of her

career and she enrolled in Harvard Business School. I had the chance to interview her recently.

Drew Dixon: So, when I went to Harvard Business School, which is in the... It wasn't sort of like this explicit, and I don't think I would have said, I would have been able to articulate in 2002, when I literally had a corner office, platinum records lining the walls, and I packed everything up in my car and drove to Boston, I don't think I could have articulated clearly that it was these two incidents that wiped me out.

Feldt: Dixon refers to two incidents. First, that according to her, she was sexually harassed and then raped by hip hop star and founder of the Def Jam label, Russell Simmons. Second, that she was sexually harassed by recording executive L.A. Reid, with whom she worked after she left Def Jam, and she left Def Jam because she simply couldn't work in that toxic environment anymore.

"I was nothing. Trash," she says in the film about how she felt about herself after the rape. I just know that it had to take incredible courage to ignite fully the embers of a story that had been smoldering by not just telling her story publicly, but also being willing to take the alleged perpetrator of rape to court and allowing her experience to become the center of the documentary, *On The Record*. What I learned from Dixon and about Dixon is much more than the prevalence of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault in the world. It's about what those things do to women's minds, to our self images, to our sense of self worth, and as a result, to our careers, and indeed, our whole lives.

There is so much to unpack in this story and I highly recommend to you that you watch the film in its entirety to get the nuances. But when it comes to women's equality, especially in reaching leadership parity in any industry or profession, the reality is that sexual harassment and violence holds us back, plain and simple. It makes us doubt ourselves. It [lowers our self-esteem](#). That, in turn, leads to higher rates of [anxiety and depression](#). Dixon observes that when women have to endure locker room talk persistently, they get smaller and smaller each time they have to laugh it off.

A study entitled [Sexual Harassment of Women Leaders](#), published in *Daedalus's* winter 2020 edition, found that female supervisors were more likely to be sexually harassed than other employees. And more importantly, the study concludes that sexual harassment is a workplace hazard that raises the costs for women to pursue leadership ambitions and in turn reinforces gender gaps in income, status, and voice. The researchers of this article found that sexual harassment actually deters women from seeking advancement, and therefore women's talents are not used at the same level as men's. This is financially costly to families and it's also costly to companies, as it is emotionally costly to the women themselves.

Dixon puts it this way. "If you are raped, you are the currency. Your life is your currency. The crime gets perpetrated and re-perpetrated every day that you carry it with you, and you carry it with you. I am a living crime scene." She goes on. "The most authentic part of myself carried the pain, so I couldn't open that box. I didn't

realize how much I was in a cage, and until I said it out loud and told the tale, I was shattered. If the #MeToo Movement hadn't happened, I mean it literally saved my life."

By the time I finished watching [On The Record](#), I was in tears, as women told their stories slowly, thoughtfully, and with deep, painful honesty. In each case, it had taken years for them to be able and then to be willing to speak up. The power imbalance between famous and even iconic men, pitted against talented women who worked for them or with them, was palpable. At the end, during the credits, Lauryn Hill sings the song *Damnable Heresies*, and [the line that is repeated over and over is, "Sold into slavery by my insecurity."](#) That line haunted me.

Powerful words that describe what happens to women from birth, in a way, when we're described by our physical appearance rather than our physical strength or our intelligence. It goes on through our teen years, when our bodies begin to be objectified. And it goes on until we are devalued as we age once we're no longer seen as sexual objects.

On The Record is directed and produced by documentary filmmaker luminaries, such as Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick, and supported by the likes of Regina Scully's *Artemis Rising* and Abby Disney's *Level Forward*. It streams free right now, through September 21st, 2020, on HBO Max, so check it out. The film lays bare the complexities of Black women's accusations of sexual abuse, and especially those by powerful men. "I love my culture," Dixon told me, "and I don't want to feed the stereotypes that have been so harmful." The courage that it took for Drew Dixon, for [hip hop pioneer Sheri Sher](#), [writer Jenny Lumet](#), the former [assistant and model, Sil Lai Abrams](#), and the [hip hop artist Sherri Hines](#) and others to go public with their experiences is breathtaking.

As Dixon says, "I thought nobody would believe me, but it's never convenient to be brave." The music industry was open enough to provide a significant amount of opportunity for women to enter and make names for themselves, but there was also a tremendous amount of sexual harassment that was considered simply the price of admission, according to Dixon. The women who told their stories in *On The Record* were largely doing the essential behind the scenes work of the music business. They're the ones who identified budding performers destined for greatness, the ones who produced and promoted the likes of Simmons, who upon being charged by them as an alleged serial rapist, used us power over them. Power over them, now, to harm, and in some cases actually end their careers.

Now, I know that as a white woman I'm stepping into territory that isn't mine to claim, and furthermore I have not been sexually assaulted, although I have certainly experienced plenty of objectification and what is now properly called harassment. Although for most of my life, those indignities were just the way things were, baked into the culture like salt into the food we eat. In fact, I doubt that there's a man over 50 who hasn't committed such behavior, or a woman over 30, maybe even 16, who hasn't experienced it in some form.

And yet my work to understand women's ambivalent relationship with power starts with listening to women's voices and stories. And in doing that, I have learned that as terrible as the physical experience of sexual violence is in the moment, what it does to our intentions for our own lives and careers is just as profound. And the experience of harassment over time can be equally devastating, like water on stone, gradually eroding even the hardest boulder. So, sexual objectification, harassment, and all forms of violence are power over techniques used to keep women silent and secondary.

Do me a favor and please rewind and listen to that sentence again. Sexual objectification, harassment, and all forms of violence are power over techniques used to keep women silent and secondary. Call it what it is. Still, if we recognize that dynamic and consciously shift the power paradigm to the power to prevail over it, we can ameliorate the effects of those harmful experiences. My friend, [poet and performer Brooke Axtell](#), is a child sex trafficking survivor who now is an advocate for others who have been sexually abused. In the last stanza of her incredibly beautiful poem, Voice Lessons, she writes, "I decline subscription. You will not win this one."

In 2017, L.A. Reid was forced to step down as chair of Epic Records after multiple allegations of such harassment. And although Simmons refutes Dixon's claims and remains at the helm of his companies, at this point [20 or more women have come forth](#) with reports of sexual harassment or rape. And there are men who understand and who are partners in ending the toxic culture that Dixon described. My friend, Vada Manager, who first introduced me to On The Record, and has been an enthusiastic promoter of the film, told me that the reason he is involved in the project is that, "To some degree, all business is personal, and my involvement in On The Record is probably as personal as it gets. I've known Drew since young adulthood and have admired her passion and ambition in music and life, but I didn't know until years later why she retreated from an industry that she loved and had experienced with much success. On The Record sadly provided that missing storyline."

Vada goes on to say, "I've seen firsthand the trauma caused to Drew and other survivors, and I want to be an ally in ensuring that we rid our workplaces and our homes from limiting the full potential of women." In a Fortune interview, [Dixon says the film's existence gives her hope](#). "It is literally just the beginning of a conversation that we have to have about the music industry and about sexual violence in general, and about the vulnerability of Black women and the way we are not protected with the kind of reciprocity that we show our men and the way we protect them."

So, my leadership today, humbly delivered, are these:

1. Number one, use the power of your voice to speak your truth and to speak up for those with less power. That's what real leaders do.

2. Number two, listen to the voices of women and let them know they are heard and believed, that their words and talents have value.
3. Number three, don't agonize, organize, to make systemic change. Even as you work to support survivors. Join me and Take the Lead to shift the power paradigm from oppressive power over to power to, one where we can all thrive and succeed. And let me give Drew Dixon's advice the last word.

Drew Dixon: Don't let them tear you down and put you in a box, you know? Just don't let it get to you. As you figure out and as we all try to figure out as a society how to make the workplace not just safer, because that sounds like some corny thing, but like more productive and robust, so we can all just do better and be better, and like also make more money and not destroy value. While we figure out the big structural stuff, continue to believe in yourself. Do not let these jerks break you on the inside. Don't let them cause you to second guess yourself. You are good enough. You, if you believe you can do it, I believe you can.

Feldt: 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'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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