



# Ambition and Confidence

March 2012

## Ambition in Women

Source: Anna Fels, M.D. is the author of *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives* (Pantheon). She is a practicing psychiatrist and representative of the psychiatric faculty at the Faculty Council of the Weill Medical College of Cornell University at New York Presbyterian Hospital.  
<http://www.womensmedia.com/balance/92-ambition-in-women.html>

Up until the last 50 years, women were largely excluded from universities, professions, clubs, politics, and jobs, even from written history. The paucity of their life choices undoubtedly impoverished the quality of their lives, but their roles, constricted though they were, were clearly delineated. The feminist movement, advances in reproductive biology, cultural changes such as the increased divorce rate, and the economic forces that necessitate the two-income family have all disrupted the traditional roles assigned to women.

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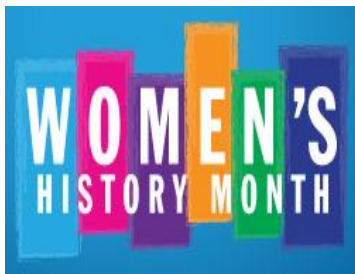
## Confidence and Ambition Discussion Points

We hope you have had a great first half of the semester. It's hard to believe that spring is almost here (although we have been so spoiled this winter!) and that soon enough our mentees will be taking finals and finishing up the 2011-2012 academic year. We say this each month, but thank you for the time you are putting into these relationships.

Since spring break is upon us, we hope that you have had at least a few times already this semester to meet with your mentee and discuss each month's topic as well as your own mentee's goals. We believe in the importance of the topic this month because this area can be such an area of struggle and dissonance for women. Hopefully these questions will lead to productive and encouraging conversations this month. As always, feel free to adapt these questions or simply use them as a reference in your conversations as needed.

### Discussion points:

- **Follow up/check in**
  - Check in with each other—what has happened since you last met?
  - How were the weeks leading up to spring break? How would you describe your stress level?
  - Where are you with your goals? Have you made any progress/had any setbacks? How are you doing in the area of work/life balance?
  - Have you been able to attend any of the Women's History Month events? If not, are there any that you are interested in that you could work into your schedules to attend together?
- **Confidence and Ambition Questions**
  - The theme of Women's History Month is "Education as Empowerment". How have you seen education as being empowering (or even confidence-building, for that matter) in your own life?
  - When is a time in your life where you feel like you excelled in the area of confidence? Do you see confidence as something that some women just "have" or something that is built? Or somewhere in between? What gives you confidence as a woman?
  - What issues do you think are unique for women in the area of confidence and ambition?
  - How would you define ambition? Would you say that you're an ambitious person? Why or why not?
  - The article in the handout discussed the many roles of women. Do you find that the many roles that you play in your life give you confidence or drain it?



## UPCOMING EVENTS

- Please mark your calendars for our end of the year social!  
 Thursday, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 4:30 – 6 pm,  
 Campus Center  
 Please RSVP in advance to  
[hnbuck@indiana.edu](mailto:hnbuck@indiana.edu) so we know  
 how much food to order!

## The Many Roles of Women

Unlike men, women have numerous accepted roles in our society—or more accurately, they have too many: innovative professional, devoted mother, competent employee, sexually attractive “babe,” supportive wife, talented homemaker, and independent wage earner, to name a few. As has been amply documented, adolescent girls, unlike boys, encounter myriad difficulties as they begin to form their ambitions—the lack of encouragement they receive, the discrimination in both academic and nonacademic settings, and the conflicting cultural pressures.

But an even more fraught period, in which ambitions must be reconsidered or reshaped, occurs after women complete their education, enter the workforce, and begin to make decisions about relationships and family. Often these women are perplexed and self-doubting as they face painful decisions about their lives. Should they relocate for their husband’s job, have children without a spouse, take a job that involves travel, stay home with their children, work more hours to satisfy their boss?

When similar issues arise in men’s lives, they feel less urgency because there is much more cultural consensus about their roles and because men continue to participate only marginally in child care. Particularly for middle-class men, work remains their primary source of identity and self-worth. As a consequence, they prioritize decisions in a predictable and largely unconflicted manner. It is the women in the midst of their adult lives, not men, who are faced with continuous pressures to reevaluate and reshape their lives.

## Conflicting Views of Ambition

I was curious and began interviewing women. The women I interviewed hated the word ambition when applied to their own lives. For these women ambition necessarily implied egotism, selfishness, self-aggrandizement, or the manipulative use of others for one’s own ends. These women’s denial of their own ambitiousness was particularly striking in contrast to the men I interviewed, who assumed that ambition was a necessary and desirable part of their lives. Perhaps even more surprising, the very women who deplored ambition in reference to their own lives freely admitted to admiring it in men.

Looking through developmental studies of both boys and girls, I noticed that they virtually always identified the same two components of childhood ambition. There was a (at least theoretically) practicable plan that involved a real accomplishment—mastery—requiring work and skill. And then there was an expectation of approval: fame, status, acclaim, praise, honor.

## Two Parts of Ambition: Mastery and Recognition

Mastery has its own powerful, built-in motivational engine. And there is no evidence to date that the intensity of their motivation differs between girls and boys, women and men. The wish for mastery is undoubtedly a key component of ambition. But the pursuit of mastery virtually always requires a specific context: an evaluating, encouraging audience must be present for skills and talents to develop. Mastery and recognition are the twin emotional engines of ambition. Yet ambition has a bad name because it includes within it an acknowledgment of this need, this dependence on the approval of others, which makes us all feel vulnerable. We wish to dissociate ourselves from such needs and believe that we are autonomous and independent—an ideal that the sociologist Robert Bellah has termed “radical individualism.” We are like the kids on the playground who put down the child who is “showing off” or “just trying to get attention.”

When these two elements are balanced (and not overdone), they are healthy and productive forces. If we are to meet our needs and realize our ambitions, both of these elements must be in play. Without an element of mastery, we have little control over our destiny. Without recognition, we feel isolated and, ultimately, demoralized.

The exercise of expertise within a public arena has historically been the great divide that separated the ambitions of men from those of women. It was here that—until very recently—male and female visions of the future parted ways. For men, work outside the home was not only a financial necessity but the cornerstone of identity and self-worth—as it remains today.

Women, on the other hand, were defined by their role (or lack of a role) as an adjunct to and provider for others within the private sphere. Private relationships represented women’s sole source of identity and affirmation. As a consequence, they carefully developed the skills required to maximize their narrowly defined opportunities. A huge premium was placed on physical attractiveness, sensitivity, and service to others. At times these qualities provided women with a richness of social connections unavailable to most men. Women valued and nurtured their relationships.

Until recently virtually all types of work that could garner public recognition were forbidden to women. Even skills such as writing, which could be done within the home but might be admired beyond the domestic sphere, were largely proscribed until the eighteenth century.

In what has undoubtedly been one of the most far-reaching revolutions in human history, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women gradually won access to a broad range of educational and work opportunities. By the mid-twentieth century, women were allowed to work outside the home—not only at menial labor, poorly paid factory jobs, or domestic chores, but in a few professions as well. The first of the two parts of ambition, developing an expertise that could be practiced in the public sphere, was finally becoming an option for women.

The fact that women could become skilled in various fields did not mean that they could reap the rewards those skills were supposed to obtain. They were now able to develop expertise, but only if their goals were “selfness.” Someone else had to be front and center. This phenomenon was noted first by writers and then, later, by research psychologists: women marginalized themselves within their own lives and ambitions. When they imagined a future within the larger community, it had to be primarily as an adjunct to a man.

## Measuring Our Progress

Twenty-five or more years have now passed since pioneering women broke through the cultural and legal barriers that had denied them access to public forms of achievement. Much has changed. Large numbers of women now acquire professional skills, and women are beginning to assume more socially prominent roles. Certainly nothing like equality has been achieved; one look at the sea of men in black suits that “represents” us in the Senate and Congress will dispel that notion.

The daily texture of women’s lives from childhood on is infiltrated with microencounters in which quiet withdrawal, the ceding of available attention to others, is expected, particularly in the presence of men.

Studies of speech, the most ubiquitous medium for soliciting recognition, have amply documented that women tend to take on the role of listener. In classes, faculty meetings, business gatherings, conferences, or just conversations where men are present, women speak less than their male counterparts. And they speak more softly, apologetically, and more tentatively, drawing less attention to themselves and their contributions.

The belief that women’s deferential behavior with regard to recognition is “natural” has not held up well in the massive research literature on gender that has evolved since the 1970’s. By and large, the literature has suggested that to a significant degree such behavior is not a constant but varies according to the social context: girls and women change their behaviors when their interactions involve men. They more openly seek and compete for affirmation when they are with other women—for example, in sports or in all-girls academic institutions.

For women at this historical moment, absent unusual luck, talent, or financial support, there are no perfect solutions. Women and their ambitions are a work in progress. Today women have more opportunities than at any prior time but still are expected to fill an almost comically large number of roles.