

Do women lack ambition? Chime in.

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Do women lack ambition? That was the question posed by Anna Fels, in a [2004 article in the Harvard Business Review](#), and again at a provocative luncheon panel earlier this week in a room full of high-powered women lawyers at a New York City law firm.

There were two panelists: Claudia Trupp, a criminal defense attorney and mother of three, whose new book, [“Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes,”](#) explores what it means to inhabit her two very different roles; and Fels, a psychiatrist, whose new book, [“Necessary Dreams,”](#) examines the loaded question of women and ambition. Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of [Flex-Time Lawyers](#), organized and moderated the conversation.

To get things going, Fels set forth her thesis, which is that women have problems around ambition, which she defines as having two components: mastery acquired over a period of time and recognition for that mastery within a community. According to Fels, women don’t have much trouble with the mastery part, but they get tripped up when it comes to getting recognized for their mastery. Women even have difficulty with the language around ambition, says Fels, who found in her research that even the most successful women tended to use euphemisms like “private journey,” or “personal best,” in place of the word, “ambition,” which doesn’t present the same problem for me. She noted that high achieving women also commonly add qualifiers to any statements on ambition (as in “I want to succeed in my career, but not at the expense of my family life.”)?

Trupp, the criminal defense attorney, represented the real world example. As a smart, accomplished woman, she talked about how she began grappling with the ambition

question when she reached the stage in life when, as she puts it, the most important thing is “making the 5:03 train home.” Still, when given the chance to be the Queen Bee, managing a team of male worker bees on an enormous, high profile case, she took it. She writes about that decision in her memoir with a mix of pride and ambivalence. That kind of ambivalence that, according to Fels, is less present in men. (For some contrary thinking, read [this article](#), suggesting that young women are as interested in taking on more responsibility as men are in the same age group, even when they become mothers. My two cents: it’s entirely possible that the ambition gap shows up as women become older and/or have more children. Henry, of Flex-Time Lawyers, says the real issue is who has financial responsibility for a household: “When careers are tied to economic necessity, ambition explodes, so you’ll see higher ambition in whichever people have the income-producing burden.”)

Questions and comments from the audience started flying:

What of those women who just don’t care enough about their work to want to get to the corner office?

What about women who feel ambitious, but direct that ambition to an avocation (this one came from a marathon runner), or to being the best mother they can possibly be? (Trupp quickly jumped in to say that all mothers, working full-tilt or not, have that ambition.)

And what of single mothers who, as sole breadwinners, have no choice but to put their all into their careers?

“What about men,” I asked. When a man doesn’t display much ambition in his career, are different factors at play, or is he just behaving like a women? Fels’ answer: “When men succeed professionally, it’s a straight win-win. But for women, it comes with baggage, in the form of questions like whether she is a good mother or what her husband must think.”