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## As Fani Willis shows, dominant, ambitious women leaders pay price

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Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis takes the stand as a witness during a hearing on the Georgia election interference case, Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024, in Atlanta. An executive coach says the courtroom drama shows women leaders operate under a microscope that magnifies misdeeds. (Alyssa Pointer, AJC)

For a while there, Fulton County prosecutor Fani Willis was a role model for career women worldwide, including me, a graduate of the University of Georgia. After all, at a time when so many Republican leaders were cowering before their bully of a leader Donald J. Trump, at a time when he was tying federal prosecutors in legal knots across

the country, here was this little-known Black female state prosecutor from Georgia vowing to hold Trump and his cronies accountable for alleged election interference. Her massive and complex case put Willis and her office on the national and global map.

The classic David vs. Goliath story consumed the headlines and set the imagination on fire for the future of women of all ages and colors who dare to aspire.

But last week came the fall, and it was hard — the sordid allegations from lawyers for one of Trump’s co-defendants that Willis benefited financially from her romantic involvement with the lead prosecutor, Nathan Wade, whom she had hired to manage the Trump case. She angrily and repeatedly [denied the allegations](#) in court, describing them as “lies, lies, lies.”

“You’ve been intrusive into people’s personal lives,” a defiant Willis told Ashleigh Merchant, a lawyer for Trump co-defendant Mike Roman. “You’re confused. You think I’m on trial. These people are on trial for trying to steal an election in 2020. I’m not on trial. No matter how hard you try to put me on trial.”

Still, Willis’s courtroom grilling was humiliating for her. The scandal has jeopardized the entire case and put Willis’s career and reputation on the line, even though many legal experts say the defense didn’t hit the legal burden to remove her from the Trump case. No matter the outcome, a coda will be in her Wikipedia entry.

Her father, [John Clifford Floyd III](#), took the witness stand to [defend his daughter](#), explain why she kept cash in the house as a Black woman and testify to her excellent character. He took some of the heat off Willis with his gentle demeanor as a straight-shooter. But the fact that her father had to step in to protect his daughter reflects how difficult it is for a woman to proclaim her truth and innocence, loud, proud and strong.

The repercussions ripple well beyond Willis. They not only dirty her reputation and compromise her case but also send a message to powerful women: Don’t you dare!

The Willis-Wade courtroom soap opera emerged as [University of Michigan](#) and Carnegie Mellon researchers published a [new research study](#) that shows that while men benefit from networking with high-status people, women lose status in the eyes of their colleagues and damage their careers.

Why? The study's authors wrote, "People typically don't like dominant and ambitious female leaders." Willis can certainly attest to that.

The authors also point to sobering but unsurprising statistics that women "continue to be underrepresented in the highest echelons of business and government."

There were more dog whistles in the Willis hearing than in "101 Dalmatians" as a posse of all-white lawyers questioned Wade and her about their physical, emotional and financial relationship.

As a former journalist and an executive coach to CEOs and C-suite executives, I find the Willis affair and the networking study to hold many lessons for women in leadership.

Here's what I would say to them:

- The microscope you will be under as a woman is infinitely more powerful and subjective than your male counterparts.
- Perception is reality. There's no getting around it. Act accordingly.
- Listen to your gut. If it feels wrong, it likely is wrong. Please don't do it.
- There are no secrets in the workplace. Word gets around. So, if you want to start a love affair with a co-worker, assume your colleagues will know.

- Acknowledge that your actions will have seismic reactions for your colleagues, their families, their careers and their paychecks. Do right by them.
- Know that your robust networks will earn the jealousy of some of your colleagues. Ensure that they know, as the University of Michigan/Carnegie Mellon research study urges, that you are using those relationships to benefit the organization, not just yourself. Yes, men don't have to do this, but those are the harsh realities. Ignore them at your peril.
- Fight back, just like Willis, if you are treated unfairly. Take the fight to the enemy. And fight to win. Not just on your behalf but those of your fellow women leaders. And take your dad.
- Somehow, over the past four years, it has become OK to be openly racist, sexist and misogynistic. For high-profile female leaders who challenge the power structure and the status quo, this holds risks, even physical danger for them and their families, as the assault of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's elderly husband and the countless physical threats against Willis show. Be aware of your surroundings.

My final advice to women in leadership is don't be willfully blind to your mistakes like Willis is, as she continues to deny her unmistakable ethical lapse. Own up to it and get out of the way of your colleagues, especially when the stakes are sky-high.

Perhaps not as high as the integrity of American elections and the future of democracy, as in the Georgia case that Willis is overseeing (for now, at least), but high enough stakes for your mistakes to reverberate across the organization and undo the hard work and sacrifice of your colleagues and you.