



Review of 'Lean in: Women, work and the will to lead' by Sheryl Sandberg

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REVIEW

Of all the ways women hold themselves back, perhaps the most pervasive is that they leave before they leave.

Lean In is marketed as part of a 'movement' which spawned from Sheryl Sandberg's 2010 TED Talk *Why we have too few women leaders*. A top-selling book that has been published in more than 25 countries, *Lean In* links to a website and online community that "works together to change the world" (*Lean In*, 2014). Women leaders in many countries have joined the movement and each country's version of the book has a foreword written by a notable woman from that country. Amidst the hype and high-profile endorsements, Sandberg's book delivers a range of rah-rah phrases aimed at increasing the number of women in leadership across the globe. As Chief Operational Officer of Facebook and a member of America's elite, Sandberg's book was always bound for success.

There are tensions in *Lean In*, which are hard for the discerning reader to reconcile. Sandberg states at the outset that the book is not a memoir, self-help book or career management text, although she includes stories about her life and career advice. It is a "sort of a feminist manifesto... for any woman who wants to pursue her chances of making it to the top of her field or pursue any goal vigorously" (p. 10). Yet the messages outlined in *Lean In* are geared very much toward women in the corporate sector who live in developed countries.



There is scant recognition of women who live in poverty or who have no access to education; although Sandberg admits that she is “fully aware that most women are not focused on changing social norms for the next generation but simply trying to get through each day” (p. 170).

Despite the use of current statistics, a selection of studies, and quotes from academics and feminists, *Lean In* does not acknowledge the areas where there are a stark lack of women in the majority of developed countries; the STEM (physical Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields (Beede et al., 2011; Botcherby & Buckner, 2012; Office of the Chief Scientist, 2012; RSE, 2012). Sandberg may have been wary of entering this debate, after her mentor Larry Summers, who is mentioned repeatedly in the book, sparked outrage in 2005 as the then Harvard University President when he gave a speech titled *Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce*. In this speech, Summers suggested that a significant reason why there are relatively few women in “high-end scientific professions” was because of “intrinsic aptitude, and particularly of the variability of aptitude” between women and men (Summers, 2005, Section 6). There is an echo of Summers’ thoughts in Sandberg’s words; “Are there characteristics inherent in sex differences that make women more nurturing and men more assertive? Quite possibly” (p. 19). However Sandberg does not elaborate on biological gender differences, she instead focuses on societal and cultural gender inequality, as well as the self-confidence and fears in individual women. Although underrepresentation of women in leadership is the central theme of *Lean In*, it would have been a more holistic text if some discussion of gendered leadership in various fields, such as STEM, were included.

Another tension is that although Sandberg’s advice is aimed at giving women assistance to climb the corporate ladder, or navigate the “jungle gym”, she shirks the thorniest current issue in this sector; quotas for women on boards (Bertrand, Black, Jensen & Lleras-Muney, 2014; Fox, 2014). “This is a huge omission from *Lean In*. Gender equity policies for public and private boards is an issue which many countries are grappling with; how to encourage more women, and women from different ethnic backgrounds, to sit at the board table

Peeling back the puff and slogans from the book reveals some important messages. In Chapter 8 “Make your partner a real partner”, Sandberg provides personal testimony and advice to women about choosing a life-partner who will carry their share of the load and actively encourage a woman in her career choice. Although not a revolutionary idea, Sandberg advocates thinking longitudinally about how a partner can support (or detract) from a woman’s leadership ambitions. Sandberg firmly believes that while men “still rule the world” (p. 5), they must be part of the solution in helping women to achieve leadership gender parity.

Another refrain in *Lean In* is the repeated message for women to find assistance and balance for their dual roles of parent and paid-worker. Therefore, each male partner is called to “do his part to support women in the workplace and in the home” (p. 172). Chapter 9 “The myth of doing it all” will be championed by working mothers who “have to endure the rude questions and accusatory looks that remind us that we’re short changing both our jobs *and* our children” (p. 124). The solution? Don’t try and do it all; decide what is important and do that well, manage your guilt and your time. These messages may feel disingenuous for single mothers, unemployed or underemployed women, women without education, training or skills, and women who work in non-professional areas who do not have access to Sandberg’s “remarkable resources” (p. 135).

It is interesting that the majority of Sandberg's mentors were men while she was studying and starting her career: Larry Summers, Lant Pritchett, Eric Schmidt, Larry Page, Sergey Brin and Omid Kordestani. Sandberg believes that "it's wonderful when senior men mentor women...any male leader who is serious about moving toward a more equal world can make this a priority and be part of the solution" (p. 71). The author also provides examples of whom and how she mentors in Chapter 5 "Are you my mentor?". This is one of the best sections in *Lean In*, where the reader gleans Sandberg's modus operandi and learns why she is so successful.

An unfortunate habit that Sandberg employs in *Lean In*, is to name drop and reinforce her status repeatedly. Leymah Gbowee, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner was at a book party in Sandberg's home (p. 7), Sandberg hosts a meeting for Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner at Facebook (p. 27), is listed as the fifth most powerful women in the world (p. 37), was "in the lounge" with her close friend Sue Decker, former CFO of Yahoo (p. 51), catches a ride on the eBay plane (p. 125), and meets with Jane Fonda and Gloria Steinem (p. 146). Although these mentions are often written in a self-deprecating manner - she was "horrified" to learn of her Forbes ranking - they serve to isolate the reader from Sandberg's message. Sandberg risks being viewed as an unrealistic and unattainable role-model. The author is a Harvard-educated, well-connected and well-resourced woman who operates one of the most successful companies in the world, hence her experiences do not relate to the majority of women, despite platitudes that she is "acutely aware that the vast majority of women are struggling to make ends meet and take care of their families" (p. 10). This criticism is not personal, but rather suggests that Sandberg's core message of changing the world one woman at a time, comes from a narrow field of experience.

In my view, the strongest message in *Lean In* comes in Chapter 7 "Don't leave before you leave". Sandberg believes that "women rarely make one big decision to leave the workforce" (p. 93), instead, they deselect themselves from opportunities before they are even in a position to have children because they are planning ahead for that possibility. This notion has been confirmed by Eccles et al. (1983; 2009) expectancy value perspective on identity formation. Longitudinal data has demonstrated that "young women placed more value than young men on the importance of making occupational sacrifices for one's family" (Eccles, 2009, p. 85). Career and family choices are impacted by two key belief systems for a woman: "the system related to her confidence in being able to succeed at it, and the system constituted by the relative value she attaches to each career she is considering, particularly in light of what other things she hopes to do with her life" (Eccles, 2013, p. 185). Many girls and women are "concerned about how to balance work and family. These views play an important role in shaping their career choices" (Eccles, 2013, p. 185). Sandberg encourages any woman "lucky enough to have options" to keep them open; "don't enter the workforce already looking for the exit" (p. 103).

Lean In is a short text, with eleven snappy chapters written in simple language; it is easily read. Sandberg's text is not a feminist manifesto, nor does it present revolutionary ideas. Rather, it offers heart-felt advice from a woman in the top tier of American society who has faced her share of gender discrimination. It is laudable that Sandberg has focused efforts on closing the leadership gap for women. The popularity of this book is testament to the world's interest in this worthy issue. However, the impact of *Lean In* is limited to its true intended audience - women in corporate America.

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