

Book Review

Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead

Sheryl Sandberg. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 228 pages

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Since its publication, Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* has excited much debate and discussion; it has been praised for re-invigorating the feminist revolution and blamed for targeting a small audience of privileged white, partnered women who want to rise in the corporate world of America. (Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was similarly criticized for its narrow scope.) *Lean In* arguably does both as it charts Sandberg's own doubts and misgivings as she entered the corporate world first at Google, then at Facebook, navigating her way through two pregnancies, some gendered revelations such as that pregnant women might need reserved parking, and a succession of high-powered mentors most women would kill for. Sandberg's message is not new – that women lack the self-confidence and chutzpah of their male counterparts, consistently devalue and undercut themselves, fail to take the high-powered positions they're offered because they fear they can't perform. But it's a message that needs reinforcing and repeating, and Sandberg's book does just that. The fact that this Ivy-league-educated, wealthy woman with an immense network of resources and contacts may have experienced the same insecurities the rest of us have should resonate for many readers. Sandberg's *Lean In* is not the final answer to women's corporate woes, but it is the continuation of an ongoing dialogue for women who want to be taken seriously in a still largely man's world.

The book begins with an introduction called "Internalizing the Revolution," where the author lays out her mission, motive, and target audience. Sandberg encourages women to lean in, leading and mentoring and ultimately increasing the numbers of women in power. And of course they can't do this without enlightened, supportive partners who do their fair share at home. And it is to both these groups that Sandberg addresses her book. She fully realizes that institutions are

equally to blame for women's lack of support and success in the working world, but she is focusing on women's internal barriers—those quiet voices that tell us we're not good enough. Women's playbook should be the same as men's, but when women try to imitate male behavior in the boardrooms of corporate America—being outspoken and aggressive—they suffer criticism, jealousy, and often institutional hurdles they can't surmount. The chapters that follow this rousing introduction deal with the following topics: the leadership/ambition gap; corporate politics; success and likeability; the jungle gym (not the ladder) to corporate success; finding and being a mentor; saying what you feel; not anticipating roadblocks that might not appear; educating your partner; avoiding the superwoman trap; initiating dialogue across genders; and reaching out to educate others. Supporting these chapters is an extensive Acknowledgements section—42 pages—that is a who's who of powerful, influential leaders from Oprah in the entertainment world to Larry Summers from academe, plus a chapter by chapter scholarly apparatus that seems to contradict the book's otherwise personal tone. If it takes a village to raise a child, it undoubtedly took a whole cadre of folks to write this book, from Sandberg's acknowledged "writing partner" Nell Scovell to mentors Gloria Steinem and Arianna Huffington.

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I happen to be teaching an Introduction to Women's Studies course this semester, as I write this review and think about Sandberg's book. In fact, I have assigned it to my class, along with bell hooks' memoir, *Bone Black*. This pairing could not have been more inspired, given the fact that I later discovered bell hooks' rather scathing review of *Lean In*, accusing Sandberg of "faux feminism" ("Dig Deep: Beyond *Lean In*," *The Feminist Wire*, Oct. 28, 2013). Hooks argues that Sandberg is just reinforcing the same old white heteropatriarchy, rather than reimagining a world and stepping outside white male corporate culture. This accusation echoes the early split in the women's movement between white feminism and what Alice Walker termed as "womanism," the latter term operating not from a position of women's powerlessness, Walker argued, but instead from a position of women's capabilities and strengths. I greatly oversimplify this split here, but it is instructive to think about it as we read the book. Sandberg's book speaks to a deep-seated problem many women—even the most accomplished—have. And it seems

to nod at least briefly in the introduction of those women it does NOT talk about—“women of color,” who fight the double bind of racism and gender prejudice. But we need to talk about the book Sandberg wrote, not the one she should have written. And she writes about the world she knows from the inside—white corporate America, where women still face subtle and insidious barriers to their success, many of them self-imposed. As Maureen Corrigan noted on NPR about the book, “Sandberg is following the first axiom of political organizing: Start where you live” (www.npr.org/March 12, 2013). And despite *Lean In's* often narrow vision, Corrigan says she will put a copy on her teenage daughter’s bookshelf.

The best parts of this book are the personal anecdotes, such as the story behind the author’s first public talk about being a woman in the corporate world. Sandberg was then working for Google and had just launched the Women@Google site, as Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda were starting up the Women’s Media Center where she gave the talk. The thesis: gender dynamics in the workforce. The intellectual work and public voice animating this talk led to Sandberg’s famous 2010 TED talk, later renamed “Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders.” Shortly after this talk, one of her colleagues at Facebook asked her why she gave more speeches on women’s issues than about Facebook, thus perfectly reinforcing her earlier talk on how gender issues play out in the workplace. Videos of this talk of course beamed globally, and inspired *Lean In*. What I found instructive about this story was the fact that even a woman like Sandberg, working at the heart of a Fortune 500 company, had not as yet found the confident public voice we hear in her talks and in this book.

Anchoring herself in a network of friends and family, as female-authored texts are wont to do, Sandberg tells the story of her mother’s work with English as a second language students, teaching full-time, then leaving the workforce to take care of her ailing parents. Sandberg’s mother later reentered the workforce and now presents workshops for elementary and high school students. “My mother has leaned in her entire life,” Sandberg argues. Benefiting from this role model and from the support and encouragement of her well-placed women friends and mentors, Sheryl Sandberg’s career demonstrates the truth of what her book argues, albeit from a more elevated perch than most of us can aspire to.

Lean In has done what I tell my Women's Studies students that feminism aims to do: reach beyond itself into the community, region, and world. Sandberg has donated all of her income from the book to establish Lean In, a nonprofit organization that promotes women's issues, and to other charities that support women. The book's merits and flaws are debated on Facebook, M. A. Wilson/*Lean In*/3

Twitter, and discussion groups at leanin.org. And in this debate the issues at the very heart of the women's movement are kept alive: how to have meaningful, remunerative work and a fulfilling personal life, and how to pass on our power and influence to future generations of young women.

Biographical Note: Mary Ann Wilson is Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where she teaches American literature, southern literature, and women's studies. She has published widely on women writers and is the author of *A Guide to the Short Fiction of Jean Stafford* (Twayne, 1996), and co-editor with Christine DeVine of *North and South: Essays in Gender, Race, and Region* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). She has won a Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities award for her work in women's studies and summer teacher institutes for area teachers, and a Women Who Mean Business Award from the Lafayette *Independent* newspaper, for her work in women's studies at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She is at work on a book called *Every Good Impulse: New Orleans Women's Book Clubs 1880-1925*. E-mail: maw0383@louisiana.edu