

FROM *RESET: MY FIGHT FOR INCLUSION AND LASTING CHANGE*

ELLEN K. PAO

The subtitle of *Reset* identifies the themes of this reading. Ellen Pao is fighting for the inclusion and fair treatment of women at the highest levels of business, finance, and tech. This means diversity in hiring, a genuine chance at promotion, equitable compensation, and a work environment free of sexual harassment. Pao recounts the experiences that eventually led her to file a gender discrimination suit against Kleiner Perkins, one of Silicon Valley's most prominent venture capital (VC) firms. These firms are, in Pao's words, "the cash engine that fuels the tech industry" — they supply entrepreneurs with the money and guidance needed to turn an idea into a profitable company. As an early investor in Amazon, Google, Sun Microsystems, Genentech, Airbnb, and many other companies, Kleiner Perkins was a prestigious and lucrative place to work, but Pao found the environment distinctly unfriendly to women. Pao (b. 1970) holds a degree in electrical engineering from Princeton and business and law degrees from Harvard. She is the former CEO of Reddit, cofounder of the nonprofit Project Include, and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer at the Kapor Center for Social Impact. *Reset* was shortlisted for the 2017 Financial Times and McKinsey Business Book of

the Year.

THE YEAR 2008 WAS A GREAT ONE for me personally. Right around the anniversary of when we met, Buddy and I had a beautiful daughter. I worked through the day on Friday, played tennis on Saturday, and our baby was born on Monday. She was everything I'd ever hoped for.

Becoming a mother changed me forever. I was also blessed with an astoundingly easy baby. She ate, she slept, she was happy. I avoided first-time-parent jitters by asking advice only from people who had two or more kids (and were thus more mellow — and more efficient). We found two great nannies who were careful and loving — thank goodness, because my job had no flexibility and Buddy's travel schedule was unpredictable, so we needed round-the-clock backup care in place. I was lucky to be able to afford them, but between the childcare and eventually preschool tuition, child-related costs would take up a huge portion of my post-tax salary.

Some partners at work treated my taking maternity leave as the equivalent of abandoning a ship in the middle of a typhoon to get a manicure, so I was nervous about what being a mother would mean for me at the office. . . . I'd arranged to take four months off, but after three I felt pressure to cut my leave short. I missed my baby horribly, but I also felt motivated to work harder than ever to get back to the office and to improve the world my baby would be inheriting.

As happy as I was in my personal life during 2008, it was a terrible year for the tech industry. When I'd first arrived, Silicon Valley was driven by creative techies fueled by love of technology, products, and hard problems. But just a few years later, it was dominated by money guys. When the crash happened in 2008, during my maternity leave, things seemed to change for the worse — even more so than during the crash in 2000. Shortly after, the press was calling Goldman Sachs¹⁷¹ “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity,” and a few years after that saw the start of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

5 And so ambitious, money-hungry people began turning their attention away from Wall Street and toward the tech sector, idolizing the rapid ascent to billionaire status of the Google founders. Almost overnight, it seemed to me, the amount of money and money types pouring in changed the vibe. Even the new rich people were different. Famous rich guy of the earlier era Bill Gates was known for working hard and then for doing good with his money. His goal was a PC on every desktop. Famous rich guy of the new era Mark Zuckerberg was known for spitefully attending a VC¹⁷² meeting in his pajamas. His goal was making it easier to find women to date. The newest crop of billionaire boys included Evan Spiegel,¹⁷³ who sent crude emails about trying to get “sorori-sluts” drunk enough to have sex with his frat brothers, and about peeing on a classmate. His goal was to enable nude selfies with self-deleting photos.

A friend in New York told me that financial types were building out their homes to feature — and I am not exaggerating — panic rooms stocked with automatic weapons and millions of dollars in cash. The New Zealand escape-route stories came a year later, but it seemed like apocalypse fever was spreading. We even created a \$200 million Pandemic and Bio Defense Fund to try to prevent it. I kept having more and more conversations like this one:

Very rich VC: The avian flu is going to kill everyone! We need to stockpile Tamiflu for the managing partners and their families!

Me [Laughing]: Only for the managing partners? You do know I'm in the room, right? Where's my hypothetical Tamiflu?

As a non-managing partner, I would presumably be left to die, fluravaged face pressed against the window of the conference room. I also pointed out that it wasn't so cool to hoard Tamiflu, because there was a shortage, and a lot of people who needed it right then, including sick kids, weren't able to get it.

Very rich VC: Says who?

Me: Says my sister.

VRVC: Who's your sister?

Me: An MD/PhD pediatric oncologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering.

VRVC: Whatever. I forgot you come from a family of overachievers. We have to be prepared!

So many super-rich people I encountered in the corridors of power believed that the rules didn't, or shouldn't, apply to them. Any of the rules. Even back when I was working at Cravath,¹⁷⁴ a trusts-and-estates lawyer told me that one of her clients, a famous public company CEO, said on his deathbed, "Why do I have to die?"

Out in the rest of the world, inclusion seemed to be on the march. Gay marriage was becoming legal in more and more states. But in Silicon Valley, the culture seemed to be getting worse and worse. Maybe I was more sensitive to it because now I had a daughter, but also I saw a shamelessness about the way they left people out, as if they knew no one would ever object or ask them to change. Their arrogance began to grate on me, and every change that came to the office seemed to make it harder for me to do my job. And I was starting to notice that it wasn't just me — it was happening to the other women partners, too.

10 After a while, the few women left were all treading water, just trying to get by as our ranks thinned and progress got harder. The attrition I had seen in engineering school was even greater in tech and greatest in VC. We were wondering: Is it just me? Is it possible that I am really too ambitious while being too

quiet while being too aggressive while being unlikable? Are my elbows too sharp? Am I not promoting myself enough, or am I too self-promotional? Am I not funny enough or not serious enough? Am I not working hard enough? Do I belong?

* * *

In the spring of 2011, I started voicing concerns again. I told Juliet¹⁷⁵ I was not given opportunities to succeed. She responded that the growing firm was not a great fit for my “quiet thoughtfulness” — or, unfortunately, she added, for women in general. When I shared my concerns with John,¹⁷⁶ including about the all-male dinners and women’s exclusion from interviewing partner candidates, I got a meager response.

The last interviews I had been involved in had been for a search led by an outside recruiter for another junior partner in 2009, and the interview spreadsheet confirmed the firm’s bias: Only three out of the approximately thirty-seven candidates on the list were women, and only two women were invited to interview. The notes contained information regarding the candidates’ gender, age, marital status, race, and ethnicity. The Kleiner partners’ written feedback on one candidate indicated that she was very strong and had important skills and knowledge missing from the team, but added that she was rejected because of her age. She wasn’t much older than me, but was a lot older than the firm’s coveted twenty-six-year-old target hire. The reasons for passing on the second woman were

equally troubling; she was very much liked by the team, but “too Eastern European.”

At around the same time, I was interviewing CEO candidates for one of John’s companies. There was some vagueness about why one otherwise strong candidate had left his last role. We were trying to dig in, with little success. It seemed as if the candidate may have been involved in some form of harassment at the firm, but it wasn’t clear how. I had a good relationship with the other VC involved in the search, and so I asked him how he thought about it. He told me that in all the years he’d been a CEO, only two employees had raised discrimination or harassment issues at his company.

“It was interesting,” he said, “because the two incidents were reported only a week apart. The first person, it was clear it was true. She had told two other people in the company, which obviously you would do if you were harassed. We got rid of the guy. But the second one? It came after a bad performance review. She had never told anybody she worked with before that. So it was clearly false.”

15 I just about had a heart attack. Holy shit, I thought. I haven’t told any of my peers about Ajit¹⁷⁷ blackballing me after we broke up, and my experiences were true, so maybe I should go tell some people. I ended up telling two women partners and Randy.¹⁷⁸ The first woman was super supportive. I liked her because she was always direct and straight with me, and she

had shared helpful advice since I started at Kleiner, ranging from explanations on how Kleiner worked to parenting advice and even book recommendations when I had my daughter. Talking about Ajit was awkward, but afterward I actually felt better that I had told someone in the office. The second person was Randy, the culture guru and my mentor. He told me he didn't have any advice for me and not to mention it again: "I never heard this," he said as he folded his arms and pursed his lips. So I went to fellow junior partner Trae Vassallo. Telling her opened up a longer conversation.

Trae had been a gymnast and was very hard-working; she was enthusiastic about everything, cheerful and willing to do everything asked of her — well, almost. We often were the last to leave the office at night, so we'd chat about our projects, our families, our health, our struggles in the office. She and I commiserated about how difficult it was to work with Randy — his need to take credit and companies, his difficulty connecting with CEOs, his my-way-or-the-highway approach to compromise, and his political nature. . . .

Those conversations made me feel like I could trust Trae. When I told her about Ajit, she grew uncharacteristically quiet. Then she said something I never expected: She had been harassed by Ajit, too. She had fretted that it was her fault, and she was still very upset more than a year later. When Ajit had asked her out for drinks to talk shop, she had been happily pregnant though hadn't announced it yet, but in the course of

the evening he started touching her with his leg under the table. Then I said something I still feel bad about. I recommended that she shouldn't report it, because I'd reported and had a hard time ever since — and they didn't do anything, anyway.

Fortunately, Trae didn't take my advice. She reported Ajit's behavior soon after, when she found out Ajit was about to do her review. He had stacked the review with people who didn't know her work well. She also saw what he'd been doing to me since I'd rejected him. She'd rebuffed Ajit and was concerned that he would take revenge on her via her review. . . .

In that round of summer reviews, Kleiner had six junior partners who had worked there for four or more years. The women (Trae, Risa Stack, and I) had twice as many years at Kleiner and twice as much total work experience as the men (Wen, Chi-Hua, and Amol Deshpande). The men were all promoted and none of the women were even considered for promotion, though Trae and I continued to work hard and to hold out hope that things would turn around.

20 Then, around the end of November, Ajit told Trae that he needed her to go to New York with him for a big due-diligence¹⁷⁹ trip. He sent emails about a dinner with a well-known CEO who might be able to help one of Trae's companies. But when they arrived in New York, Trae saw that the table was set for two at dinner. She learned that no CEO was coming — the trip was just her and Ajit, in a hotel together for the weekend.

When she realized what he had planned, she left the restaurant.

Later that night he came to her hotel room in his bathrobe and banged on the door, asking to be let in. Aghast, she eventually had to physically push him out the door. She still seemed traumatized when she told me about her experience a month later, after our December offsite. She said she thought he might be a sociopath. I felt terrible guilt that I had told her not to report him in the first place, and I was glad she'd ignored my advice and spoken up about it. I also felt guilty that I hadn't pushed the firm to get rid of him when I'd realized what kind of guy he was. . . .

When Trae had first reported her concerns about Ajit to Kleiner a year earlier, they told her, just as they told me, that if he did anything more he would be out. So she went to them and disclosed the fake New York trip. Far from its being the final straw, one of the managing partners suggested, "You should feel flattered."

After that conversation, I finally had clarity on the whole situation. For years, partners had promised to build a better culture, to prevent Ajit from harassing women, to help everyone succeed, and to live up to their goal of Kleiner being a meritocracy. I had come to believe that they were unwilling to have the conversations and take the difficult actions to fix these problems. Instead they made promises to mollify us, promises I'm not sure they ever intended to keep. . . .

On January 4, 2012, I sent an email to the COO¹⁸⁰ and managing partners to try to reach a solution, even if that meant my leaving the firm. . . . I concluded with a request for an open dialogue on solutions, and for either protection from further ostracism or help with an exit.

25 I was wrong in assuming Kleiner would take immediate action. After more than a month, the company responded to Trae's and my complaints by putting Ajit on leave, but he continued to participate in meetings, anyway, as if he were still there. The managing partners didn't do anything about it. I learned that Ajit was negotiating for a gigantic severance package. Ultimately, after two tense months, he did leave.

He was able to negotiate for compensation while being kicked out, but my experience as an ongoing employee had been so different. In 2009, I had mentioned to John that I was unhappy that my compensation wasn't in line with what the men around me were getting. I'd been promised the world when he hired me, and again when I'd tried to quit in 2007, but it hadn't happened. I'd thought my request to John was professional and reasoned.

John didn't agree. In fact, he yelled at me in person. He told me that asking for more compensation wasn't a good look. He punctuated his message with an email:

I strongly recommend you stop complaining about your compensation. Just drop it. . . . It clearly still bugs you, and

that attitude of yours is a) no secret and b) damaging to your standing among [our firm's leaders].

That was in 2009. For almost three years, his response had intimidated and shamed me into silence — to the point where I said nothing even when I was denied any share of profits in our next fund, while all the men working on the fund were allocated carry¹⁸¹ worth at least several million dollars.

It was 2012. I was sick of being patient. Not only weren't things changing, the arrogance seemed to be at a new high: I found out the partners had taken some CEOs and founders on an all-male ski trip, a total boondoggle. They spent \$50,000 on the private jet back and forth to Vail, several hundred dollars per person on ski condos, at least three hundred dollars for each ski jacket, not including lift tickets, private ski instructors, meals, drinks, and massages. Chi-Hua¹⁸² later explained that they didn't invite any women, because women probably wouldn't want to share a condo with men. I wondered what other all-male events had taken place that I hadn't even heard about. . . .

30 Still, there was no sexual-harassment or discrimination policy or training at Kleiner. Still no effort to make the culture more diverse or inclusive. Still I felt like years of my life had been wasted. I thought of Sheryl Sandberg's¹⁸³ speech encouraging women in the business world to demand our place at the table and to ask for pay equity. The strategy hadn't gone

well for me so far in VC, but I was determined to keep trying.

When I spoke to the COO again, he asked how much I wanted in order to quietly leave. I suspected it would take around \$10 million to wake up the firm and prevent future problems, and I imagined that was in the ballpark of what Ajit would be given. And I knew that amount wouldn't break them but would hurt. They were billionaires and routinely loaned out amounts like \$18 million. That's the equivalent of \$1,800 if you have \$100,000, or \$180 if you have \$10,000. It's annoying, but it won't wreck you.

"I want no less than what Ajit gets," I said. The COO gasped. . .

Finally, after weeks had passed with no news of any changes, I told John I was filing a claim with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, based on the lack of responsiveness of the firm to my years of claims, the poor quality of the investigation into the serial harassment and related retaliation, the lack of a response in the form of any kind of sexual-harassment policy, and the bigger issues of culture and inclusion that were being ignored. That was in March 2012.

I quietly filed a lawsuit directly against Kleiner in May; I saw the lawsuit described in the press several days later. I suspected that Chi-Hua, who had just been on a conference panel with the reporter, leaked the story himself. . . .

35 In response to my suit, Kleiner hired a powerful crisis-management PR firm. Companies hire them when the shit hits the fan. These firms can be paid to do things that you don't want to do — and Brunswick¹⁸⁴ was known for it. On their website, they bragged about having troll farms — “integrated networks of influence” used in part for “reputation management” — and I believe they enlisted one to defame me online. Dozens, then thousands, of messages a day derided me as bad at my job, crazy, an embarrassment. This company that I had given years of my life to, that I had made millions for, was crucifying me publicly. Repeatedly, Kleiner was quoted as calling me a “poor performer”; on their website they said I was making “false allegations” and “unfounded claims,” and they went out of their way to criticize me to the press, leading to a slew of negative publicity that would culminate in an online Vanity Fair hit piece insinuating that Buddy was gay, a fraud, and a fake husband.

Everywhere I looked, strangers on the Internet were calling me a bad employee. Look at the praise I got before I complained, I imagined telling them. They were calling my marriage a sham. Tell that to our baby, I thought. Even in the sonogram she looked like Buddy. They said I was money-grubbing. Can you name anyone in the venture capital industry who is less money-grubbing than I am? I wanted to ask these writers. I work almost every waking minute, and I can't even remember the last time I bought anything for myself. Everyone I work for has multiple jets!

I tried to stay focused on my personal life. Buddy and I were over the moon that our daughter was so happy and healthy and that, after a lot of trying, I was pregnant with our second child.

Still, the negativity wore me down. I was so tired, and the barrage of anger was so relentless that I began to sleep even less than usual. I barely ate. I kept going to work day after day, even though I knew most of the partners didn't want me there. I was invited to fewer and fewer meetings and sent fewer and fewer emails. I spent almost all my time in the office alone, except for Monday meetings and occasional visits from people outside Kleiner. . . .

Partners would not greet me when we crossed paths, much less make eye contact. Hallway conversations would pause until I passed. When I sat down near coworkers, they would sometimes get up, gather their notebooks and coffee mugs, and move to other chairs. Trae and I moved our chats outside the office; we would leave five minutes apart so no one would know. Eventually even that got too uncomfortable. That feeling of being unwanted, unwelcomed, and excluded was exceedingly painful.

40 Then in June, during a regular pregnancy checkup, my doctor looked at the sonogram and I could tell something was wrong. He called me into his office and leaned across his big wooden desk to gently let me know that I'd had a miscarriage.

“When I saw all the horrible things being said about you, I

was traveling in Russia, and I was worried about you and the baby,” my doctor said, referring to an article in The New York Times earlier that month. The article harkened back to the dark ages: An expert was quoted saying he was skeptical about my claims because he hadn’t ever heard of mistreatment of women in Silicon Valley, and anonymous sources asked why I didn’t leave after such poor treatment. “Stress can be a correlating factor, and you’ve certainly had plenty of that. I’m so sorry.”

I felt, in that moment, that Kleiner had taken everything from me: They had taken all my time and energy for seven years. They had taken my dignity by refusing to listen to me. They had championed a man who had sexually harassed me and at least one or two other women and had promoted him over us. Now I felt they had taken my chance to have another child. I wanted more than anything to leave that terrible place. Crumpled in my doctor’s office, I also felt more determined to make things better for other women.

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For all the talk about how Kleiner was a family, women never seemed to succeed there. For all the company’s pride about the women they’d brought in, very few of them were happy, and almost none of them stayed.

The Kleiner higher-ups acted as if the dearth of women was a huge mystery. Some people passed it off as biological. Others said it had something to do with maternal clocks, a burning

desire to “opt out.” But I was in those rooms for nearly a decade and I could have told them, if they had asked, why the women never lasted. It wasn’t a mystery and it had nothing to do with our unbridled desire for babies.

45 The real reason was: The system is designed to keep us out. These are rooms full of white heterosexual men who want to keep acting like rooms full of white heterosexual men, and so either they continue to do so, creating a squirm-inducing experience for the rest of us, or they shut down when people of color or women enter the room and resent having to change their behavior.

We are either silenced or we are seen as buzzkills. We are either left out of the social network that leads to power — the strip clubs and the steak dinners and the all-male ski trips — and so we don’t fit in, or our presence leads to changes in the way things are done, and that causes anger, which means we still don’t fit in. If you talk, you talk too much. If you don’t talk, you’re too quiet. You don’t own the room. If you want to protect your work, you’re not a team player. Your elbows are too sharp. You’re too aggressive. If you don’t protect your work, you should be leaning in. If you don’t negotiate, you’re underpaid. If you do negotiate, you’re complaining. If you want a promotion, you’re overreaching. If you don’t ask for a promotion, you get assigned all the unwanted tasks. The same goes when asking for a raise.

There is no way to win, and you're subject to constant gaslighting.¹⁸⁵ When you stand up for yourself, there are fifteen reasons why you don't deserve what you're asking for. You're whining. You don't appreciate what you have. There is this steady drumbeat of: We let you in here even though you don't belong! Be grateful. Just drop it.

The internal bias was also directed externally. One woman partner told me that she was reluctant to bring women CEOs in to pitch to Kleiner partners, because she knew they faced much higher bars for investment. Two outsiders — including one male founder — complained to me about how Kleiner talked about women in a sexist way. Unfortunately, they're not the only ones. I've heard too many stories from women CEOs about their struggles to be treated fairly when asking VCs for funding. They get talked over, interrupted, ignored, leered at, and propositioned. And I've heard too many stories from men in those rooms — one of whom declared himself a feminist after watching his CEO beaten down in those conversations. One VC asked an entrepreneur to babysit his kids — and I am positive he's not the one in charge of childcare in his family.

I felt confident that if anyone asked, I could suggest how to dismantle this Catch-22-based system, how to create an inclusive workplace, how to make it a real family. I would say that there has to be a path to victory for every kind of person, not just guys who like golf and skiing and good scotch, who all went to the same schools. I would say that you do business

during business hours, you listen to each other, and you find ways to work as a team rather than as cutthroat competitors; you don't get rewarded for screwing over other people, especially the quietest or least connected people. And I would say that, at the bare minimum, when you have a man who is behaving in a predatory, manipulative fashion toward multiple women in your "family," and you're hearing worrisome things about him over the course of several years, by God, you don't tolerate it.



ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. To what extent do you think Pao's career was blocked by a "glass ceiling"? What injurious workplace policies, incidents, and comments does Pao describe? Which of these seem most important to you, and why?
2. Most of us will never own multiple private jets or make million-

dollar deals. Does the simple fact of the venture capitalists' extreme wealth prompt an emotional or political reaction in you? Explain.

3. Review [paragraphs 10](#) and [46–47](#). Would you agree with Pao that women face more difficult balancing acts at work than most men? What experiences from your own employment and education support or challenge Pao's perspective?
4. Review Pao's description of Kleiner's hiring practices in [paragraph 12](#). What, if anything, do you consider problematic here? Do you see any practices that you think might be (or should be) illegal? What would a rejected candidate learn about why she was rejected, and should she have the right to know more? Who inside a company has an obligation to report biased hiring practices?
5. In [paragraph 14](#), what do you make of the CEO's observation concerning the two women who reported sexual harassment at another company — that is, that a woman would “obviously” report such a thing, and that the second woman was lying? Why might someone not report harassment? How closely does the CEO's logic resemble arguments made by supporters of President Trump or Judge Roy Moore when they were accused of sexual misconduct?
6. Review the solutions that Pao offers in her concluding paragraph. To what extent would you endorse her goals, and do you think we are making progress toward the equitable treatment of working women?
7. Pao lost her gender discrimination lawsuit against Kleiner in 2015, before the #MeToo movement went viral and before

accusations of harassment were made against numerous powerful men including Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, Alabama Judge Roy Moore, President Donald Trump, and television hosts Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer. Explain whether you think jurors today might decide Pao's case differently. What role, if any, do you think public awareness of an issue should have in the administration of justice?

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

8. Read "The Gender Knot" by Allan Johnson ([p. 527](#)), paying close attention to its analysis of patriarchy as a *kind of society* (not just a group of sexist men) and to its various descriptions of careers, money, power, and highly successful women. What parts of Pao's story could be used to illustrate the points Johnson makes, and where can you apply his theoretical framework to explain the world of Kleiner Perkins?
9. In the cartoon on [page 443](#), what real-life person seems to be the model for Sorensen's man in a bathrobe, and how does the cartoonist make this clear without naming him? In what ways does the cartoon mirror the incidences of harassment Pao describes, the decision-making processes of the women targeted, and the assumptions and behavior of the men involved?
10. Read or review Noreen Malone's "Zoë and the Trolls" ([p. 285](#)) and compare Pao's experience in an elite Silicon Valley venture capital firm with Zoë Quinn's experience during the Gamergate incident. How does misogyny operate in Pao's and Quinn's different environments, and what do you think can be done to

combat it?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

11. Research and report on Reddit, where Pao was formerly CEO, or one of the organizations she is currently involved in — Project Include or the Kapor Center for Social Impact. For example, did Pao's leadership at Reddit make its corporate culture or its media site more welcoming to women? How have Project Include and the Kapor Center tried to foster inclusivity and diversity in the tech world, and with what degree of success?