Lean In: What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?

SHERYL SANDBERG

—◻—

My grandmother Rosalind Einhorn was born exactly fifty-two years before I was, on August 28, 1917. Like many poor Jewish families in the boroughs of New York City, hers lived in a small, crowded apartment close to their relatives. Her parents, aunts, and uncles addressed her male cousins by their given names, but she and her sister were referred to only as "Girlie."

During the Depression, my grandmother was pulled out of Morris High School to help support the household by sewing fabric flowers onto undergarments that her mother could resell for a tiny profit. No one in the community would have considered taking a boy out of school. A boy's education was

---

Sheryl Sandberg is the chief operating officer of Facebook and the first woman member of its board of directors. She has also served as a vice president at Google and as chief of staff for the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. This selection is the first chapter of her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013).

the family's hope to move up the financial and social ladder. Education for girls, however, was less important both financially, since they were unlikely to contribute to the family's income, and culturally, since boys were expected to study the Torah while girls were expected to run a "proper home." Luckily for my grandmother, a local teacher insisted that her parents put her back into school. She went on not only to finish high school but to graduate from U.C. Berkeley.

After college, "Girlie" worked selling pocketbooks and accessories at David's Fifth Avenue. When she left her job to marry my grandfather, family legend has it that David's had to hire four people to replace her. Years later, when my grandfather's paint business was struggling, she jumped in and took some of the hard steps he was reluctant to take, helping to save the family from financial ruin. She displayed her business acumen again in her forties. After being diagnosed with breast cancer, she beat it and then dedicated herself to raising money for the clinic that treated her by selling knockoff watches out of the trunk of her car. Girlie ended up with a profit margin that Apple would envy. I have never met anyone with more energy and determination than my grandmother. When Warren Buffett talks about competing against only half of the population, I think about her and wonder how different her life might have been if she had been born half a century later.

When my grandmother had children of her own—my mother and her two brothers—she emphasized education for all of them. My mother attended the University of Pennsylvania, where classes were coed. When she graduated in 1965 with a degree in French literature, she surveyed a workforce that she believed consisted of two career options for women: teaching or nursing. She chose teaching. She began a Ph.D. program,

got married, and then dropped out when she became pregnant with me. It was thought to be a sign of weakness if a husband needed his wife's help to support their family, so my mother became a stay-at-home parent and an active volunteer. The centuries-old division of labor stood.

Even though I grew up in a traditional home, my parents had the same expectations for me, my sister, and my brother. All three of us were encouraged to excel in school, do equal chores, and engage in extracurricular activities. We were all supposed to be athletic too. My brother and sister joined sports teams, but I was the kid who got picked last in gym. Despite my athletic shortcomings, I was raised to believe that girls could do anything boys could do and that *all* career paths were open to me.

When I arrived at college in the fall of 1987, my classmates of both genders seemed equally focused on academics. I don't remember thinking about my future career differently from the male students. I also don't remember any conversations about someday balancing work and children. My friends and I assumed that we would have both. Men and women competed openly and aggressively with one another in classes, activities, and job interviews. Just two generations removed from my grandmother, the playing field seemed to be level.

But more than twenty years after my college graduation, the world has not evolved nearly as much as I believed it would. Almost all of my male classmates work in professional settings. Some of my female classmates work full-time or part-time outside the home, and just as many are stay-at-home mothers and volunteers like my mom. This mirrors the national trend. In comparison to their male counterparts, highly trained women are scaling back and dropping out of the workforce in high numbers. In turn, these diverging percentages teach institutions

Sheryl Sandberg

and mentors to invest more in men, who are statistically more likely to stay.

Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation and the first woman to serve as president of an Ivy League university, once remarked to an audience of women my age, "My generation fought so hard to give all of you choices. We believe in choices. But choosing to leave the workforce was not the choice we thought so many of you would make."

So what happened? My generation was raised in an era of increasing equality, a trend we thought would continue.

In retrospect, we were naïve and idealistic. Integrating professional and personal aspirations proved far more challenging than we had imagined. During the same years that our careers demanded maximum time investment, our biology demanded that we have children. Our partners did not share the housework and child rearing, so we found ourselves with two full-time jobs. The workplace did not evolve to give us the flexibility we needed to fulfill our responsibilities at home. We anticipated none of this. We were caught by surprise.

If my generation was too naïve, the generations that have 10
followed may be too practical. We knew too little, and now girls know too much. Girls growing up today are not the first generation to have equal opportunity, but they are the first to know that all that opportunity does not necessarily translate into professional achievement. Many of these girls watched their mothers try to "do it all" and then decide that something had to give. That something was usually their careers.

There's no doubt that women have the skills to lead in the workplace. Girls are increasingly outperforming boys in the classroom, earning about 57 percent of the undergraduate and 60 percent of the master's degrees in the United States. This gender gap in academic achievement has even caused some to worry about the "end of men." But while compliant, raise-your-hand-and-speak-when-called-on behaviors might be rewarded in school, they are less valued in the workplace. Career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself—traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting. This may explain why girls' academic gains have not yet translated into significantly higher numbers of women in top jobs. The pipeline that supplies the educated workforce is chock-full of women at the entry level, but by the time that same pipeline is filling leadership positions, it is overwhelmingly stocked with men.

There are so many reasons for this winnowing out, but one important contributor is a leadership ambition gap. Of course, many individual women are as professionally ambitious as any individual man. Yet drilling down, the data clearly indicate that in field after field, more men than women aspire to the most senior jobs. A 2012 McKinsey survey of more than four thousand employees of leading companies found that 36 percent of the men wanted to reach the C-suite, compared to only 18 percent of the women. When jobs are described as powerful, challenging, and involving high levels of responsibility, they appeal to more men than women. And while the ambition gap is most pronounced at the highest levels, the underlying dynamic is evident at every step of the career ladder. A survey of college students found that more men than women chose "reaching a managerial level" as a career priority in the first three years after graduating. Even among highly educated professional men and women, more men than women describe themselves as "ambitious."

There is some hope that a shift is starting to occur in the next generation. A 2012 Pew study found for the first time that among young people ages eighteen to thirty-four, more young women (66 percent) than young men (59 percent) rated "success in a high-paying career or profession" as important to their lives. A recent survey of Millennials found that women were just as likely to describe themselves as ambitious as men. Although this is an improvement, even among this demographic, the leadership ambition gap remains. Millennial women are less likely than Millennial men to agree that the statement "I aspire to a leadership role in whatever field I ultimately work" describes them very well. Millennial women were also less likely than their male peers to characterize themselves as "leaders," "visionaries," "self-confident," and "willing to take risks."

Since more men aim for leadership roles, it is not surprising that they obtain them, especially given all the other obstacles that women have to overcome. This pattern starts long before they enter the workforce. Author Samantha Ettus and her husband read their daughter's kindergarten yearbook, where each child answered the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" They noted that several of the boys wanted to be president. None of the girls did. (Current data suggest that when these girls become women, they will continue to feel the same way.) In middle school, more boys than girls aspire to leadership roles in future careers. At the top fifty colleges, less than a third of student government presidents are women.

Professional ambition is expected of men but is optional—or worse, sometimes even a negative—for women. "She is *very* ambitious" is not a compliment in our culture. Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty. Female accomplishments come at a cost. 15

And for all the progress, there is still societal pressure for women to keep an eye on marriage from a young age. When I went to college, as much as my parents emphasized academic achievement, they emphasized marriage even more. They told me that the most eligible women marry young to get a "good man" before they are all taken. I followed their advice and throughout college, I vetted every date as a potential husband (which, trust me, is a sure way to ruin a date at age nineteen).

When I was graduating, my thesis advisor, Larry Summers, suggested that I apply for international fellowships. I rejected the idea on the grounds that a foreign country was not a likely place to turn a date into a husband. Instead, I moved to Washington, D.C.,

which was full of eligible men. It worked. My first year out of college, I met a man who was not just eligible, but also wonderful, so I married him. I was twenty-four and convinced that marriage was the first—and necessary—step to a happy and productive life.

It didn't work out that way. I was just not mature enough to have made this lifelong decision, and the relationship quickly unraveled. By the age of twenty-five, I had managed to get married . . . and also divorced. At the time, this felt like a massive personal *and* public failure. For many years, I felt that no matter what I accomplished professionally, it paled in comparison to the scarlet letter D stitched on my chest. (Almost ten years later, I learned that the "good ones" were not all taken, and I wisely and very happily married Dave Goldberg.)

Like me, Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, deputy director of the Council on Foreign Relations' Women and Foreign Policy Program, was encouraged to prioritize marriage over career. As she described in *The Atlantic*, "When I was 27, I received a posh fellowship to travel to Germany to learn German and work at the *Wall Street Journal*. . . . It was an incredible opportunity for a 20-something by any objective standard, and I knew it would help prepare me for graduate school and beyond. My girlfriends, however, expressed shock and horror that I would leave my boyfriend at the time to live abroad for a year. My relatives asked whether I was worried that I'd never get married. And when I attended a barbecue with my then-beau, his boss took me aside to remind me that 'there aren't many guys like that out there.'" The result of these negative reactions, in Gayle's view, is that many women "still see ambition as a dirty word."

Many have argued with me that ambition is not the problem. Women are not less ambitious than men, they insist, but more enlightened with different and more meaningful goals. I do not dismiss or dispute this argument. There is far more to life than 20

climbing a career ladder, including raising children, seeking personal fulfillment, contributing to society, and improving the lives of others. And there are many people who are deeply committed to their jobs but do not—and should not have to—aspire to run their organizations. Leadership roles are not the only way to have profound impact.

I also acknowledge that there are biological differences between men and women. I have breast-fed two children and noted, at times with great disappointment, that this was simply not something my husband was equipped to do. Are there characteristics inherent in sex differences that make women more nurturing and men more assertive? Quite possibly. Still, in today's world, where we no longer have to hunt in the wild for our food, our desire for leadership is largely a culturally created and reinforced trait. How individuals view what they can and should accomplish is in large part formed by our societal expectations.

See p. 89 for tips on making concessions while still standing your ground.

From the moment we are born, boys and girls are treated differently. Parents tend to talk to girl babies more than boy babies. Mothers overestimate the crawling ability of their sons and underestimate the crawling ability of their daughters. Reflecting the belief that girls need to be helped more than boys, mothers often spend more time comforting and hugging infant girls and more time watching infant boys play by themselves.

Other cultural messages are more blatant. Gymboree once sold onesies proclaiming "Smart like Daddy" for boys and "Pretty like Mommy" for girls. The same year, J. C. Penney marketed a T-shirt to teenage girls that bragged, "I'm too pretty to do homework so my brother has to do it for me." These things did not happen in 1951. They happened in 2011.

Even worse, the messages sent to girls can move beyond encouraging superficial traits and veer into explicitly discouraging

leadership. When a girl tries to lead, she is often labeled bossy. Boys are seldom called bossy because a boy taking the role of a boss does not surprise or offend. As someone who was called this for much of my childhood, I know that it is not a compliment.

The stories of my childhood bossiness are told (and retold) with great amusement. Apparently, when I was in elementary school, I taught my younger siblings, David and Michelle, to follow me around, listen to my monologues, and scream the word "Right!" when I concluded. I was the eldest of the neighborhood children and allegedly spent my time organizing shows that I could direct and clubs that I could run. People laugh at these accounts, but to this day I always feel slightly ashamed of my behavior (which is remarkable given that I have now written an entire book about why girls should not be made to feel this way, or maybe this partially explains my motivation).

Even when we were in our thirties, pointing out this behavior was still the best way for my siblings to tease me. When Dave and I got married, David and Michelle gave a beautiful, hilarious toast, which kicked off with this: "Hi! Some of you think we are Sheryl's younger siblings, but really we were Sheryl's first employees—employee number one and employee number two. Initially, as a one-year-old and a three-year-old, we were worthless and weak. Disorganized, lazy. We would just as soon spit up on ourselves as read the morning paper. But Sheryl could see that we had potential. For more than ten years, Sheryl took us under her wing and whipped us into shape." Everyone laughed. My siblings continued, "To the best of our knowledge Sheryl never actually *played* as a child, but really just organized other children's play. Sheryl supervised adults as well. When our parents went away on vacation, our grandparents used to babysit. Before our parents left, Sheryl protested, 'Now I have to take care of David and Michelle *and*

Grandma and Grandpa too. It's not fair!'" Everyone laughed even louder.

I laughed too, but there is still some part of me that feels it was unseemly for a little girl to be thought of as so . . . domineering. *Cringe.*

From a very early age, boys are encouraged to take charge and offer their opinions. Teachers interact more with boys, call on them more frequently, and ask them more questions. Boys are also more likely to call out answers, and when they do, teachers usually listen to them. When girls call out, teachers often scold them for breaking the rules and remind them to raise their hands if they want to speak.

I was recently reminded that these patterns persist even when we are all grown up. Not long ago, at a small dinner with other business executives, the guest of honor spoke the entire time without taking a breath. This meant that the only way to ask a question or make an observation was to interrupt. Three or four men jumped in, and the guest politely answered their questions before resuming his lecture. At one point, I tried to add something to the conversation and he barked, "Let me finish! You people are not good at listening!" Eventually, a few more men interjected and he allowed it. Then the only other female executive at the dinner decided to speak up—and he did it again! He chastised her for interrupting. After the meal, one of the male CEOs pulled me aside to say that he had noticed that only the women had been silenced. He told me he empathized, because as a Hispanic, he has been treated like this many times.

The danger goes beyond authority figures silencing female 30
voices. Young women internalize societal cues about what defines "appropriate" behavior and, in turn, silence themselves. They are rewarded for being "pretty like Mommy" and encouraged to be nurturing like Mommy too. The album *Free to Be . . . You and*

Me was released in 1972 and became a staple of my childhood. My favorite song, "William's Doll," is about a five-year-old boy who begs his reluctant father to buy him a traditional girl's toy. Almost forty years later, the toy industry remains riddled with stereotypes. Right before Christmas 2011, a video featuring a four-year-old girl named Riley went viral. Riley paces in a toy store, upset because companies are trying to "trick the girls into buying the pink stuff instead of stuff that boys want to buy, right?" Right. As Riley reasons, "Some girls like superheroes, some girls like princesses. Some boys like superheroes, some boys like princesses. So why do all the girls have to buy pink stuff and all the boys have to buy different color stuff?" It takes a near act of rebellion for even a four-year-old to break away from society's expectations. William still has no doll, while Riley is drowning in a sea of pink. I now play *Free to Be . . . You and Me* for my children and hope that if they ever play it for *their* children, its message will seem quaint.

The gender stereotypes introduced in childhood are reinforced throughout our lives and become self-fulfilling prophesies. Most leadership positions are held by men, so women don't *expect* to achieve them, and that becomes one of the reasons they don't. The same is true with pay. Men generally earn more than women, so people *expect* women to earn less. And they do.

Compounding the problem is a social-psychological phenomenon called "stereotype threat." Social scientists have observed that when members of a group are made aware of a negative stereotype, they are more likely to perform according to that stereotype. For example, stereotypically, boys are better at math and science than girls. When girls are reminded of their gender before a math or science test, even by something as simple as checking off an M or F box at the top of the test, they

perform worse. Stereotype threat discourages girls and women from entering technical fields and is one of the key reasons that so few study computer science. As a Facebook summer intern once told me, "In my school's computer science department, there are more Daves than girls."

The stereotype of a working woman is rarely attractive. Popular culture has long portrayed successful working women as so consumed by their careers that they have no personal life (think Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl* and Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal*). If a female character divides her time between work and family, she is almost always harried and guilt ridden (think Sarah Jessica Parker in *I Don't Know How She Does It*). And these characterizations have moved beyond fiction. A study found that of Millennial men and women who work in an organization with a woman in a senior role, only about 20 percent want to emulate her career.

This unappealing stereotype is particularly unfortunate since most women have no choice but to remain in the workforce. About 41 percent of mothers are primary breadwinners and earn the majority of their family's earnings. Another 23 percent of mothers are co-breadwinners, contributing at least a quarter of the family's earnings. The number of women supporting families on their own is increasing quickly; between 1973 and 2006, the proportion of families headed by a single mother grew from one in ten to one in five. These numbers are dramatically higher in Hispanic and African-American families. Twenty-seven percent of Latino children and 52 percent of African-American children are being raised by a single mother.

Our country lags considerably behind others in efforts to help parents take care of their children and stay in the workforce. Of all the industrialized nations in the world, the United States is the only one without a paid maternity leave policy.

As Ellen Bravo, director of the Family Values @ Work consortium, observed, most "women are not thinking about 'having it all,' they're worried about losing it all—their jobs, their children's health, their families' financial stability—because of the regular conflicts that arise between being a good employee and a responsible parent."

For many men, the fundamental assumption is that they can have both a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life. For many women, the assumption is that trying to do both is difficult at best and impossible at worst. Women are surrounded by headlines and stories warning them that they cannot be committed to both their families and careers. They are told over and over again that they have to choose, because if they try to do too much, they'll be harried and unhappy. Framing the issue as "work-life balance"—as if the two were diametrically opposed—practically ensures work will lose out. Who would ever choose work over life?

The good news is that not only can women have both families and careers, they can *thrive* while doing so. In 2009, Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober published *Getting to 50/50*, a comprehensive review of governmental, social science, and original research that led them to conclude that children, parents, and marriages can all flourish when both parents have full careers. The data plainly reveal that sharing financial and child-care responsibilities leads to less guilty moms, more involved dads, and thriving children. Professor Rosalind Chait Barnett of Brandeis University did a comprehensive review of studies on work-life balance arid found that women who participate in multiple roles actually have lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of mental well-being. Employed women reap rewards including greater financial security, more stable marriages, better health, and, in general, increased life satisfaction.

It may not be as dramatic or funny to make a movie about a woman who loves both her job and her family, but that would be a better reflection of reality. We need more portrayals of women as competent professionals and happy mothers—or even happy professionals and competent mothers. The current negative images may make us laugh, but they also make women unnecessarily fearful by presenting life's challenges as insurmountable. Our culture remains baffled: *I don't know how she does it.*

Fear is at the root of so many of the barriers that women face. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making the wrong choice. Fear of drawing negative attention. Fear of overreaching. Fear of being judged. Fear of failure. And the holy trinity of fear: the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter.

Without fear, women can pursue professional success and personal fulfillment—and freely choose one, or the other, or both. At Facebook, we work hard to create a culture where people are encouraged to take risks. We have posters all around the office that reinforce this attitude. In bright red letters, one declares, "Fortune favors the bold." Another insists, "Proceed and be bold." My favorite reads, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

In 2011, Debora Spar, president of Barnard College, an all-women's liberal arts school in New York City, invited me to deliver its commencement address. This speech was the first time I openly discussed the leadership ambition gap. Standing on the podium, I felt nervous. I told the members of the graduating class that they should be ambitious not just in pursuing their dreams but in aspiring to become leaders in their fields. I knew this message could be misinterpreted as my judging women for not making the same choices that I have. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I believe that choice means choice for all of us. But I also believe that we need to do more to encourage

women to reach for leadership roles. If we can't tell women to aim high at a college graduation, when can we?

As I addressed the enthusiastic women, I found myself fighting back tears. I made it through the speech and concluded with this:

> You are the promise for a more equal world. So my hope for everyone here is that after you walk across this stage, after you get your diploma, after you go out tonight and celebrate hard—you then will lean way in to your career. You will find something you love doing and you will do it with gusto. Find the right career for you and go all the way to the top.
>
> As you walk off this stage today, you start your adult life. Start out by aiming high. Try—and try hard.
>
> Like everyone here, I have great hopes for the members of this graduating class. I hope you find true meaning, contentment, and passion in your life. I hope you navigate the difficult times and come out with greater strength and resolve. I hope you find whatever balance you seek with your eyes wide open. And I hope that you—yes, you—have the ambition to lean in to your career and run the world. Because the world needs you to change it. Women all around the world are counting on you.
>
> So please ask yourself: What would I do if I weren't afraid? And then go do it.

As the graduates were called to the stage to collect their diplomas, I shook every hand. Many stopped to give me a hug. One young woman even told me I was "the baddest bitch" (which, having checked with someone later, actually did turn out to be a compliment).

I know my speech was meant to motivate them, but they actually motivated me. In the months that followed, I started thinking that I should speak up more often and more publicly

about these issues. I should urge more women to believe in themselves and aspire to lead. I should urge more men to become part of the solution by supporting women in the workforce and at home. And I should not just speak in front of friendly crowds at Barnard. I should seek out larger, possibly less sympathetic audiences. I should take my own advice and be ambitious.

Joining the Conversation

1. Sheryl Sandberg argues that women are on the whole still raised to be less ambitious than men and that they should be encouraged to aim more for leadership roles. What evidence does she provide for this so-called "leadership ambition gap"? What factors does she say cause this gap?
2. Sandberg mentions her grandmother, who was a successful businesswoman, as well as her mother, who dropped out of a Ph.D. program to be a "stay-at-home parent." How do these personal details support her argument?
3. According to Sandberg, the media stereotype of a working woman is "rarely attractive" (paragraph 33). Do you agree? Think of some examples of successful working women in movies and television. How do these examples support or contradict Sandberg's claim?
4. How do you think Sandberg might respond to Saul Kaplan's argument in "The Plight of Young Males" (pp. 732–35)?
5. According to Sandberg, most American girls are led to have modest career expectations and to focus more on having a family, while boys are typically raised to aim for leadership positions. Has this been your experience? Write an essay responding to what she says, drawing from your own experience and the readings in this chapter as support for what you say.

Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In

BELL HOOKS

A YEAR AGO, few folks were talking about Sheryl Sandberg. Her thoughts on feminism were of little interest. More significantly, there was next-to-no public discussion of feminist thinking and practice. Rarely, if ever, was there any feminist book mentioned as a bestseller and certainly not included on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Those of us who have devoted lifetimes to teaching and writing theory, explaining to the world the ins and outs of feminist thinking and practice, have experienced that the primary audience for our work is an academic sub-culture. In recent years, discussions of feminism have not evoked animated passion in audiences. We were far more likely to hear that we are living in a post-feminist society

BELL HOOKS is an author and activist who teaches at Berea College, in Kentucky. She has written numerous books, including *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), and *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). Born Gloria Jean Watkins, she changed her name to honor her mother and grandmother. She says she chose not to capitalize the name because "it is the substance of my books, not who is writing them, that is important." This essay, a response to Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, appeared on the blog *The Feminist Wire* on October 28, 2013.