

NO FEMALE LEADERS, JUST LEADERS

LEANING IN

IN CONTEXT

PRIMARY QUOTE
Sheryl Sandberg, 2013

KEY FIGURE
Sheryl Sandberg

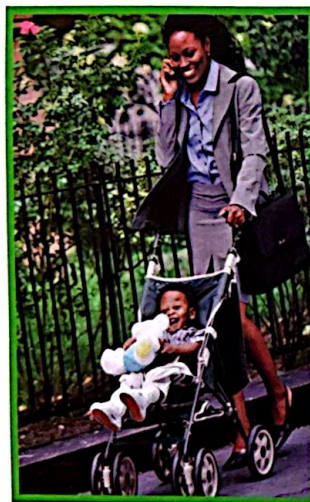
BEFORE
1963 Betty Friedan writes *The Feminine Mystique*, chronicling the boredom of American housewives.

1983 US feminist Gloria Steinem's collection of essays, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, includes an essay on "The Importance of Work."

AFTER
2016 American journalist Jessica Bennett receives enthusiastic reviews for her book *Feminist Fight Club*, which urges women to support each other in the workplace.

2017 After the sudden death of her husband, Sheryl Sandberg writes *Option B*, in which she calls for a more compassionate workplace.

In her 2013 international best seller *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, urges women to reach for the highest ranks of every institution of power. Instead of focusing on the "glass ceiling" of systemic barriers stopping women from getting to the top, as many feminists had, she tells women who have made it to demand more for women lower down the ladder.



When Sandberg was heavily pregnant and working for Google, for example, she asked for reserved parking, a policy that remained in place for pregnant women after she left. As a top executive, she argues, she had the power to put policies in place that benefited other women.

Trickle-down feminism

Critics questioned whether the trickle-down feminism Sandberg advocates would work, pointing out that earlier female leaders, such as the UK's former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, were not known to fight for the feminist cause. They also disagreed with Sandberg's assertion that the onus should be on women to believe more in themselves, and berated her for ignoring intersectional discrimination, such as the racism experienced by women of color.

Some critics commented that Sandberg said little that women of earlier generations had not heard before, but she was credited with

A mother wheels her child to a day care on her way to work. Childcare is still primarily seen as a woman's responsibility, even when she also has a demanding career.

See also: Socialization of childcare 81 • The roots of oppression 114–117 • Women's union organizing 160–161 • Gross Domestic Product 217 • Pink-collar feminism 228–229 • Anticapitalist feminism 300–301 • The pay gap 318–319

raising important issues, such as encouraging women to negotiate their salary; use assertive body language to feel more powerful; and watch against negative, gendered connotations of words such as "bossy." Her appeal was also in being a rich, white woman at the top of the corporate ladder, someone to whom corporate America aspired.

Adapt to the system

Sandberg laments the absence of paid maternity leave in the US and the persistent gender discrimination women face when trying to balance work and homelife, but her solution is to adapt to the system and persevere in unfavorable work environments. She also advocates that women devise strategies for survival at work before and after pregnancy: "The months and years leading up to having children," she says, "are not the time to lean back, but the critical time to lean in." Citing the example of a female investment banker, she says that dedication to her job during the busy child-rearing years paid off

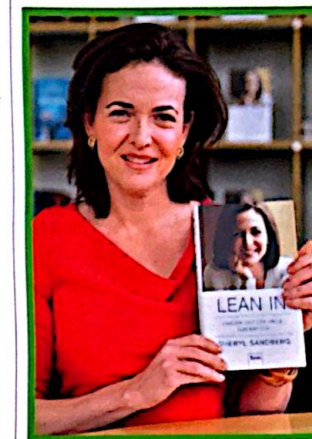
later. When the children had left home, a woman who had "leaned in" would still have a fulfilling career.

Sandberg acknowledges that not everyone wants to reach the top, and is not insensitive to the emotional demands of motherhood. Citing her own experience at the top of the corporate ladder in 2013, she describes "running" back to her laptop after spending time with her children in the evening and secretly breast-pumping in a bathroom stall while taking conference calls. Stating that the days when she could disconnect from work on vacation or over the weekend had "long gone," Sandberg describes extended working hours as "the new normal for many of us."

The book's critics

High-profile fans of *Lean In* included Chelsea Clinton and Oprah Winfrey, but many feminists criticized the book. Shortly after its publication, the American feminist and scholar bell hooks dismissed Sandberg's strategy and said that it would not liberate women. Instead,

hooks, who described Sandberg as a "lovable younger sister who just wants to play on the big brother's team," maintained that "leaning in" only served the interests of the patriarchal power structure of white, middle-class men. ■



Sheryl Sandberg, whom *Fortune* magazine ranks as one of the five most powerful women in business, publicizes *Lean In* in Germany. The book became an international best seller.

“
Women are leaders everywhere you look ... Our country was built by strong women and we will continue to break down walls.
”
Nancy Pelosi
American politician

Women CEOs

In 2013, when *Lean In* was published, Sandberg wrote that just 5 percent of CEOs at the top 500 companies trading on the US stock exchange were women, while only 25 percent of the senior executive positions and 19 percent of board seats were held by women. As Sandberg said, the numbers had barely budged in a decade.

In 2018, five years after *Lean In* was published, the number of women CEOs in the US was still at 5 percent,

according to the Glass Ceiling Index published in the UK by *The Economist* magazine.

Studies have found that having more women and generally more diversity on boards leads to better decisions, more creative problem-solving, improved profits, and less damaging risk-taking. In 2018, 27 global investors, including major pension funds, joined the 30% Club, a UK initiative started in 2010 to get more women onto the boards of top companies. It aims for women to occupy 30 percent of such roles by 2020.