

Perspectives on 'Lean In'

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The corporate world is routinely reproached for its dearth of women leaders. Consequently, the clutch of women who have presumably shattered the 'glass ceiling', are feted, felicitated, and held up as trophies. They are eagerly seized upon as role models by those on the fringes of success, perhaps to demonstrate that, notwithstanding stories in the media, organizations are not laggards in the journey towards gender equality. So when Sheryl Sandberg, the personable COO of Facebook, writes a book, it resonates in the corridors of management institutes halfway across the world. Understandably so, because B-Schools are the incubators of prospective corporate executives, all of whom virtually experience life through the social media.

Sandberg's pronouncements have been hailed as a clarion call to women and derided with equal intensity for being overly facile. Further, her advice to women has drawn flak for addressing the concerns of a segment of elite, affluent women who can afford the phenomenally high cost of hired help at home. This article is not merely about her book; it is also about reactions to her exhortations to women to 'lean in' to their careers, realise their potential and set right the gender skewness in the corridors of power.

The polyphony of criticism she draws is testimony to the contentious nature of any debate that hinges on providing a level playing field. She posits that women fail to seize opportunities, anticipating problems in their attempts to achieve work-life balance, particularly in the wake of pregnancy and childbirth. She urges them not to leave before they have left... that is, not to prune their aspirations till push comes to a shove, and the decision to pull out of the workforce becomes imperative.

One of her most significant observations is that women are hamstrung by their diffidence. Karen Peetz, President of BNY Mellon, the world's largest bank, echoes her sentiments when she says, 'What holds back women is not lack of ability, but lack of confidence' (Business Line, 18 October 2013).¹ Since a display of confidence is generally misconstrued as a sign of competence, women

are invariably bypassed in favour of men at selection interviews and appraisals. Indeed, research has revealed that women's social conditioning often predisposes them to underplay their achievements. It is noteworthy that feminist scholars such as Juliet Mitchell (1966) had drawn attention to the insidious ways in which domestic work, maternity, sex, and the socialization of children are manipulated to create intangible mental bonds in women, making their inferiority and inequality seem natural to them.

A survey carried out by Powell and Graves (2003) indicates that a good manager is universally seen as possessing predominantly masculine characteristics. They contend that this 'masculine stereotype of the good manager is self reinforcing and inhibits the expression of femininity by women in management positions' (pp. 137-39). However, this general perception is in contradistinction to recent studies that link modest behaviour to emotional intelligence, one of the distinguishing characteristics of transformational leadership (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). A considerable body of research in management posits that the masculine traits valorised in discussions on leadership are scarcely the ones modern organizations need for success. On the contrary, the purportedly feminine qualities of empathy and humility, and a reasonable ability to question the validity of one's own decisions, help create an environment conducive to personal and professional growth. Women in the professional workforce are increasingly pointing out that contemporary research advocates the need to 'Lean back', not 'Lean In'. In her 2013 article for the Forbes Leadership Forum, Vaughan observes that

Sandberg glorifies traditionally "male" characteristics - outspokenness, credit-taking, and constant presence in the work environment. These values may be linked with individual professional success, but do they actually translate to success

¹ This is reflected in their linguistic styles too, further reinforcing the perception that they lack confidence. (Tannen, 1995).

for society as a whole? Lost in the debate about how and how much we should be leaning in, we miss the point. Rather than telling women to match men's behavior, we should be encouraging everyone to lean back, to emulate a more feminine leadership style that is better correlated with society's well-being.

In accordance with expectations of stereotypical behaviour from managers, organizations are seeking to equip women for leadership roles: either by helping them acquire 'masculine' qualities, or by making the workplace environment more woman-friendly, or else, by celebrating their 'special' qualities of interpersonal skills. Meyerson and Fletcher observe that the persistent clamour for a level playing field has made corporate organizations introduce a slew of measures to assimilate, accommodate... as well as celebrate women. Such an approach 'gives women stilts to play on an uneven playing field, but it doesn't flatten out the field itself' ((2000, p.130). Thus they argue that while the symptoms of gender bias are addressed, the bias continues to remain deeply entrenched.

Besides, affirmative action of any kind breeds resentment and contempt amongst those who are outside its ambit. It reinforces the belief that the beneficiaries of these diluted selection criteria are inferior in their abilities, and hence unworthy of the positions they occupy. The fact that a felicitous fusion of socio-biological and cultural forces may place one half of the species in a position of privilege is not easy to acknowledge!

In an attempt to explore the implications of issues raised by Sandberg's book, a group of B-school students participated in a discussion. It emerged that in India bias often surfaces at the level of entry in the form of insinuating questions about the woman interviewee's plans for the future (read marriage). In the course of the interaction a participant interposed that employers were predominantly concerned with ensuring that the organization benefited from the time and resources invested in a prospective employee. Of course, justice demands that a competent woman not be penalised for acquiescing to societal norms such as patrilocality; fair dealing dictates that provisions be made for her to take

time off for childbearing and childrearing... but organizations, by their very nature, are impelled by self-interest, and not by justice! It appears that talk of gender equality in corporate organizations is mere tokenism. Men endorse it wholeheartedly because it is politically correct to do so; women advocate it enthusiastically, while masking their own misgivings about the feasibility of the balancing act!

As they struggle to cope on the dual fronts of home and workplace, even the most capable women face allegations of irresponsibility and insufficient commitment. Guilt is therefore a woman's constant companion; and to overcome its attendant anxieties, women redouble their efforts to be 'perfect'. The pressures and pulls of trying to 'have it all', of not losing the hard-won privileges of the women's movement, are generating a crop of edgy, overly competitive women, out to prove they are no less efficient than men... and no less nurturing than their mothers!

Women in the developed countries too, have a long way to go before they can achieve a level playing field. Anne Marie Slaughter, Sandberg's most vocal critic, demolishes the shibboleth that women can attain perfect work-life balance. Young women today are acutely conscious that they would be required to make more compromises than their partners. We welcome women into the corporate fold, without insisting on a more equitable distribution of household responsibilities. Slaughter contends that, while society has changed the way it looks at women, the manner of looking at men remains unchanged.

So do our young men think any differently from their counterparts in the earlier ages on matters concerning women, work and domestic chores? It would be an interesting exercise to take a quick sojourn through the mind of a 'modern' Indian man, an icon of the youth brigade. In his article 'Home Truths on Career Women' (2012) Chetan Bhagat expounds

....choosing a capable, independent and career-oriented woman can also bring enormous benefits... [for] a man who marries a career woman gets a partner to discuss his own career with. ...A spouse who understands office politics and can

give you good advice can be an asset. Two, a working woman diversifies the family income streams. In the era of expensive apartments and frequent lay-offs, a working spouse can help you afford a decent house and feel more secure about finances. ...Of course, all these benefits accrue if men are able to keep their massive, fragile egos aside and see women as equals...

Presumably, this is the opinion of a man who can keep his ego aside. What is ironical is that the entire piece hinges on the 'benefits that accrue' to a man who has a working wife. Juxtapose this piece with lines from the eighteenth century pamphleteer and reformer William Cobbett's advice 'On Choosing a Wife':

...a knowledge of domestic skills affairs is so necessary in every wife that the lover ought to have it continually in his eye... [because] lovers may live on aerial diet, but husbands stand in need of solids...

Lest one be tempted to infer that Bhagat's advocacy of a working wife constitutes advancement over Cobbett's emphasis on domestic skills, one should note the superficiality of the change in attitudes towards prospective spouses. The Man's needs are central, primary; his spouse is the modern equivalent of the Biblical 'helpmeet'. Her value therefore, lies in her ability to fulfil His need!

In her inimitable style, the redoubtable American feminist Gloria Steinem once stated that 'some of us women are becoming the men we once wanted to marry'. But, she continued

...we figured out that not enough men are becoming the women they wanted to marry. And that is the next part of the revolution; right? We'll always have two jobs until all the work of the home and the rewards of the home and child rearing are equally shared by women and men. Like yes, raising daughters more like our sons is a good thing. But how about raising our sons more like our daughters? (2004)

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