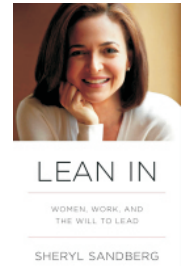


BOOK REVIEW

LEAN IN WOMEN, WORK, AND THE WILL TO LEAD by SHERYL SANDBERG.



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Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* is a massive cultural sensation and its title became an instant catchphrase for empowering women. The book rapidly peaked to the best sellers' list internationally, kindling global conversations about women and their ambitions. In fact, Sandberg overshadowed opinion pages and was seen on every major television show and debate, besides being on the cover of *Time* magazine. Her book ignited an intense debate about women and leadership.

Right in the book's opening anecdote, Sandberg effectively describes her laborious experience of managing a job when she was pregnant with her first child. Her experiences are laced with humor when she describes herself as a whale, having gained 70 pounds with her feet having swelled two shoe sizes. To add to the misery, she, like many other women suffered from morning nausea and vomiting. The challenges of appearing normal were indeed overwhelming.

Sandberg prides herself in being a feminist who has benefitted from the struggles of the activists who stood up valiantly for women's rights.

"We stand on the shoulders of the women who came before us, women who had to fight for the rights that we now take for granted," she writes. Sandberg takes heart in the fact that compared to other women worldwide who are far less privileged with respect to basic civil rights and education, American women are centuries ahead. However, knowing that the truth could be worse should not hold us back from trying to make it better.

It is an assumed reality that when women are asked if they enjoy equality at work place, the answer, in majority of the cases, will be a resounding yes. The irony however lies in the fact that these very women do not feel confident about demanding a pay hike, a promotion, or even a parity of pay scale.

The statistics, although an enhancement on previous decades, are certainly unfavorable towards women— Women hold just 22 percent of seats in parliaments globally. Despite the fact that in 2015, the US senate congress boasted of more women members than ever before, they actually accounted for only 19 percent of the elected officials. In India, the record is no better with a meager 12 of the



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seats in Parliament being held by women members.

The grim reality continues with respect to the corporate scenario with a meager 5 percent of the S&P500 CEOs being women. A mere 25% of the women occupy senior executive positions in the United States. In India, the position is much worse with a bare 8% of the women occupying director positions among BSE100 companies.

In *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg – Facebook COO and one of Fortune magazine's Most Powerful Women in Business – draws on her own experience of working in some of the world's most successful businesses and looks at what women can do to help themselves, and make the minor changes in their lives that can effect a change on a more universal scale.

Sandberg is immensely sympathetic to the pull of maternal instincts and explains how it perennially clashes with the hassles of professional work. She is sensitive to the fact that balancing personal and professional life could indeed prove to be highly challenging. Sandberg has written about the given subject with tremendous refinement, consideration and sympathy. Most of her writings are drawn from first hand experience. On reading the book, the reader tends to agree with Sheryl Sandberg that Women must indeed 'Lean In'. *Lean In* is not merely confined to the fine balancing act between parenting and working. The book speaks, at great length, about the difficulties and hindrances faced by women in their attempt to forge ahead. Out of the book's eleven chapters, three of them have been devoted towards driving a balance between career and domesticity. The remaining chapters provide an insight about how career women could perhaps control and chart out their own professional path and drive it ahead, at a time when gender prejudice is more pronounced

than most people acknowledge. Sandberg has been criticized for shifting the burden on women to forge ahead and independently overcome hindrances and challenges. Full credit goes to Sandberg for the careful research conducted about the level of chauvinism and bigotry that is prevalent in the workplace. Another strong point of the book is her readiness to own up to her own shortcomings and self-doubt. Following, is an assessment of what she gets spot-on about the challenges of becoming a successful woman leader:

- Striking a smooth balance between a career and domesticity remains a challenge even before a woman gives birth. This is because of the stereotype expectations of society regarding the role of a woman in the family.
- She points out to the gloomy reality that men continue to reign. Sandberg substantiates with plentiful examples to drive home this point. "Of 197 heads of state, only 22 are women." Another fact: Of the top 500 companies by revenues, only 21 are headed by women. In politics, women hold just 18% of congressional offices.
- Sandberg throws light about the plight of women's compensation. The scenario was far worse in 1970, when American women earned a measly 59 cents for every dollar that men earned—things have not substantially improved. In the year 2010, women earned 77 cents for every dollar that their male counterparts earned. The solution suggested by her was: negotiate like a man. She substantiates it with a personal example and says that when she was in talks with Mark Zuckerberg about joining Facebook, she was open to the idea of taking up the job on the employers' terms. Subsequently she was prodded by

her husband to make a counter-offer, which she eventually did and Zuckerberg graciously made a more lucrative proposal.

- Sandberg believes the feminist revolution which was going great guns has considerably ebbed in recent times. Sandberg details expansively about the hurdles faced by women in the workplace, which includes “blatant and subtle sexism, prejudice and sexual harassment.” She stresses upon the importance of pliability at workplace including parental leave policies and the importance of providing accessible child care. She speaks about a 2011 McKinsey study which shows that in contrast to men who are promoted based on potential, women get promoted on the basis of past endeavors and achievements. She reiterates that hurdles that hold back women may be both, internal as well as external. The concept of internal obstacles is interesting as Sandberg talks at length about how we as women hold ourselves back by internalizing negative messages that we get throughout our lives. We lower our own expectations of our achievements by compromising on our career goals and with our limited aspirations to assume leadership positions. Sandberg courted controversy with this observation. She goads women to pursue their career aspirations with élan and without any pangs of guilt as they are in no manner inferior to their male counterparts. “We lower our own expectations of what we can achieve,” she writes. She agrees that personal drive is quite complex which in turn is shaped by our inner will which is influenced by our upbringing besides the opportunities that we come across as well as the peer circles that we move in. This apart, the educational opportunities we get also plays a pivotal role besides the
- network we build, the connections thereof, as well as the expectations and prejudices of those around us.
- Sandberg cites more than a dozen studies that underline the obstacles women face. One of the most absorbing, though 10 years old, still sounds relevant. She calls it the Howard/Heidi study. A team of two professors prepared a case study relating to a real-life entrepreneur named Heidi Roizen. In here, they described how she became a successful venture capitalist primarily by relying on her gregarious personality and huge personal and professional network. The professors then had a group of students read Roizen’s story with her real name attached and another group read the story with the name changed to “Howard.” The students were asked to rate Howard and Heide on their respective achievements and on how pleasing they seemed as colleagues. While the students rated them equally in terms of success, they thought Howard was likeable while Heidi seemed selfish and not “the type of person you would want to hire or work for.” Thus Sandberg concludes: when a man is successful, he is fascinating; when a woman does well, people like her less.
- Sandberg provides a detailed insight into the challenges that women face all along their career path. She also speaks at length about the desire that most women harness to be appreciated. However, it is often seen that when women move up the corporate ladder, they are not necessarily appreciated and their accomplishments are not valued. In such a scenario, Sandberg asks, how motivated would we feel to achieve? Sandberg gives a personal example about how she was herself susceptible to this

fear that others would be turned off by her achievements. Then she prods women to overcome the Howard/Heidi stereotype and advocate on their own behalf. She tells a concise story to illustrate her point: During her first performance review with Zuckerberg, six months into her job at Facebook, he told her that her inclination to be acceptable to everyone was holding her back. If a person seeks acceptability, he won't change anything. "Mark was right," she writes. "Everyone needs to get more comfortable with female leaders," she insists, "including female leaders themselves."

- She does not mince words while making a contrary point about mentors. "Don't Ask Anyone to be Your Mentor," is the title of one of Sandberg's chapters. She opines that seeking help and advice from people both senior and junior to you to resolve a specific problem would be far more productive.
- Sandberg believes that women should solicit help from their partners to contribute and chip in with at least half the parenting work.
- Sandberg stokes controversy on this point as well. She says women have to stop being "maternal gatekeepers" and should insist that their partners chip in significantly in parenting and housework. She speaks at length about the importance of empowering men on the domestic front. While acknowledging the difficulties involved in doing so, she reiterates the significance of the same. This is especially true in case women wish to pursue demanding careers. She also underlines "the myth of managing it all. Quoting from personal experience, she says how tough it was for her to find a balance that

worked— she restricted her work time between 9 am and 5:30 p.m. and made it a point to have dinner with her kids when she wasn't traveling, and she worked from home after her children went to bed.

- Sandberg understands that many women do not aspire to pursue a lucrative career as well as manage a domestic life. In the melee of juggling between domesticity and career, assuming leadership roles do not figure in the scheme of things for most career women. She agrees that a large segment of working women brave it out to fend for the basic needs of their family. She acknowledges the fact that a privileged few have access to higher education and the leadership roles that she essays. All said and done, she says that increased number of women in leadership roles will in turn help other women to break stereotypes and barriers. She wants women to talk about getting ahead and what it means to seek leadership roles.

As a matter of fact, Sandberg can be credited for having written an immensely readable and absorbing book with an equally powerful message. The highlight of the book though, is also about the female vulnerability. The book contains numerous first-hand anecdotes which are backed by believable and documented statistics, as well as footnote studies that adequately authenticate her opinion. Sandberg shares her personal experience of the marital discord with her first spouse which eventually resulted in a divorce when she was in her 20s. She shares the guilt trip she encountered as a fall out thereof and details about how, she as a young woman, felt mortified when people around her called her "bossy," She was afflicted by self-doubt despite her laudable academic achievement at Harvard. Along with

the Howard/Heidi study, she details a survey conducted in 2002 involving medical students in a surgery rotation. In the above survey, the women were very under confident as compared to their male counterparts and accorded themselves much lower scores. This, despite the fact that their faculty evaluations were far more favorable towards them. She recalls another survey that was conducted in 2004 amongst Harvard law students wherein it was found that women accorded themselves scores, way lower than men, with respect to the skill of law practice. She details about one more study conducted in 2012 about political aspirants wherein it was documented that male prospects were more likely to say they were “very qualified” to run for office. The above are just a few of the many documented examples. The underlying message here is irrespective of the profession women pursue, their low self-assessment is universal and all encompassing.

Sandberg shares another account with her readers about her reaction to the Forbes list of the world’s 100 most powerful women that was released in the year 2011. Sandberg stood at no. 5 position, which was surprisingly ahead of Michelle Obama, the First lady of US as well as Sonia Gandhi, a politician, who enjoyed enormous political clout in India, at that point in time. Sandberg admits to feeling embarrassed and exposed, instead of feeling powerful adding that she voiced to her colleagues about her concern that list was “ridiculous.” However, her assistant advised her to graciously accept the compliment with a simple “thank you.”

With ease and her inimitable style, she uses the above anecdote to reiterate her vulnerability at the same time underlines how disquieting and embarrassing it can be to accept praise.

If asked to point out the most remarkable part of the book, I perhaps felt that the point Sandberg made about women being hindered by barriers that exist within themselves. She has rightly observed, “We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in”. Women internalize negative messages throughout their lives, messages which reiterate that it is wrong to be outspoken, aggressive and more powerful than men. This is true for women across the globe irrespective of the part of the world they belong. She speaks at length about gender stereotypes.

Another appealing part of the book is where Sandberg reiterates that the better world would be where there would be equality between genders; where women ran half the countries and companies and men ran half our homes.

In summation it may be said that though cultures differ, the hindrances that exist between women folk and their ambitions and aspirations are often identical. The factors that invariably recur as obstacles are social customs, familial pressures, gender prejudices and a paucity of role models. It is rather difficult for a woman to handle these pressures as a stand-alone. Hence Sheryl Sandberg’s point that resonates very intensely is the need for women to come together as a community to stand up for each other. This book appeals to women as well as men as Sheryl provides practical suggestions for managing and overcoming the challenges that arise from career advancement. As Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook rightly remarks, “This book is smart and honest and funny. Her words will help all readers – especially men – to become better and more effective leaders”.