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**The Dearth of Women in Topmost Positions: Readings in Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In***

Sheryl Sandberg is currently the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook and was earlier running the online sales and operations of Google till 2004. She has been listed among the 50 most powerful women across the globe in 2012 by *Forbes*. She published her autobiography *Lean In* in 2013. Sandberg's basic argument in *Lean In* is that women need to move up in the business world, stretch their limits, explore their potential, project confidence, 'sit at the table' and physically 'lean in' to make themselves heard.

The term 'lean in' does not merely denote physically leaning in to hear something or to make yourself heard, but leaning in to leading and powerful roles rather than settling for subordinate roles. This term evolved out of Sandberg's recurrent observation of groups of professionals gathering for discussions and meetings and women at such gatherings avoiding taking front row seats, raising hands, asking questions and giving inputs. She tries to find the reasons behind these inhibitions of women. She is of the view that both internal and external factors are responsible for women not making it to the top. Sandberg calls it the 'Chicken and Egg' situation, addressing the external issues that prevent women from achieving high-profile jobs as 'Chicken' and women's internal inhibitions and fears as 'Egg' (*Lean In* 4). Sandberg is of the opinion that once women overcome their internalised fears, they would not hesitate from trying for challenging but high-profile jobs. This would abridge the 'leadership gap' that Sandberg is worried about. Anjali Chaudhary says in her review of *Lean In*:

While most books on gender inequality focus on what needs to happen socially, culturally and institutionally, in her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg frames the issue squarely in terms of what women need to do to address the barriers that exist within themselves that bar their rise to the top of the corporate chain. (118)

Sandberg argues that women, socialised by gender stereotypes to be nice, submissive, agreeable and docile miss out on workplace success. This explains the negligible number of

women leaders, despite girls being the fifty percent of the total graduates in US in 2008 (*Lean In* 11). She stresses the idea that the cause of this leadership gap lies in the manner in which men and women are perceived in our society. Men are applauded and rewarded for bold leadership and thus become successful leaders as adults, whereas, girls are accused of being ‘bossy’ for the same set of traits and behavior, and are thus discouraged from pursuing leadership roles as adults.

The changing socio-economic paradigms are opening new spaces for women but these opportunities are not utilised to rise further by most of the women. Taking a cue from Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of ‘liquid modernity’, Mary Evans, in her book *The Persistence of Gender Inequality*, links the struggles waged by contemporary women with Baumann’s notion of ‘liquid modernity’. Evans states that women face a lot of trouble while adapting to the ever-changing, non-constant nature of identity and relationships in contemporary times. On one hand, the development has provided women a relatively liberal space, and, on the other hand, it has burdened them with never-ending set of options and priorities that they have to choose from time and again.

Though a large number of women are now having access to education and jobs, but the entire responsibility of home and children is still solely on their shoulders. Women are going out to work and have gained economic independence but still they are serving as primary homemakers and child caretakers. Women are made to choose between marriage and education, marriage and job, job and children, self-time and family time, ambitions and household duties throughout their lives. It is in this context that Sandberg’s arguments presented in *Lean In* have to be placed and studied.

Sandberg notices that at times, women succumb to the pressure the multiple duties exert on them and thus either give up their careers or stop making their careers a priority. This happens all the more when women are expecting babies or have recently delivered a baby. However, later, the pain of not having had a satisfactory career growth troubles them throughout their lives because they did not realise their existential potential to the maximum.

Sandberg admits that she has been able to point out and write about these issues because she had herself faced them. She got sensitised towards the issues of women when she was expecting her first child, and managing a nine to five job turned out to be a hassle for her. It is then that she realised there have to be some emendations at workplace. She mentions that she too

suffered from internalised insecurities and doubts despite being in a position of influence but eventually she realised that her fears are baseless and she must outgrow them and thus, she wishes for other women around her to realise the same. She concedes, “I am fine applying the word “powerful” to other women – the more the better – but I still shake my head in denial when it is applied to me” (Lean In 27). She admits that the internal constraints are hard to overcome but accepting and working on them is a prerequisite to overcoming them.

When Sandberg began her college education in 1987, her classmates, both males and females seemed to be equally competitive and intelligent. However, the situation was not similar after twenty years as most of her female friends were either working part-time or had dropped out of work for several reasons. None of the female friends had attained leadership positions despite having scored more than their male classmates back in college. She notices that “... many of these girls watched their mothers to try to “do it all” and then decide that something had to be given up. That something was usually their careers” (Lean In 7). Sandberg is disappointed to see a large number of women compromising with their careers despite having all the potential under social, personal or familial pressure

Sandberg states that theirs is not the first generation to have gained equal career opportunities but theirs is the first generation to realise that opportunities do not evolve into achievements for women most of the times. She traces several reasons for it. First, in their late twenties, when women are at the peak of their careers and want to push forward, they are reminded of the ticking of their biological clock, pressurising them to find partners and have children. Second, lack of support of the spouse in household work overburdens women with two full-time jobs, making it difficult for them to focus on their careers. Third, workplace environments are not sensitive to problems of expecting and new mothers, leading to a large number of women dropouts.

Sandberg highlights the manner in which internalisation of roles, fears and expectations make women anxious about family, marriage and children even when they are in college, that is, long before they actually marry or bear children. These internalised obstacles hold women back and make them prioritise marriage and children over career and success. She stresses the issue that women never head towards challenging roles because right from adolescence, they are made to see marriage and child bearing as their ultimate destiny.

When Sandberg talks about internalised fears, she highlights women's fear of negotiation and explains that it happens because women fear that if they sound very assertive, they would not be liked by others. An opinionated, bold woman is usually designated as arrogant, bossy and proud whereas for the same traits, a male employee is seen as professionally competent. Women end up internalising the messages they get throughout their lives – that they should not be outspoken, aggressive, powerful and demanding. Thus, women lower their expectations of themselves and satisfy themselves with comfortable, mediocre designations and achievements. Sandberg quotes Arianna Huffington, founder of The Huffington Post, who opined that "...learning to withstand criticism is a necessity for women. Early in her career, Arianna realised that the cost of speaking her mind was that she would inevitably offend someone" (Lean In 26). Out of the fear of being considered bossy and snobbish, women usually do not ask for promotions and better pay packages. Thus, they remain stuck in mediocre, unsatisfactory jobs rather than aiming at and asking for better opportunities.

Sandberg also raises the issue of salary discrimination which is rampant even in twenty first century. She states that in 1970s, American women were paid 59 cents for every dollar being paid to men which has increased to just 77 cents in 2010 (Lean In 2). Not only does she talk about the faults in economy that does not regard women as equally capable but also talks about the fact that women out of the deep rooted fear of not being smart and capable enough, themselves shy away from demanding their due.

Sandberg mentions that when she was offered the position of COO of Facebook by Mark Zuckerberg, she had to be strongly persuaded by her husband David and her brother that the package offered to her would not have been accepted by any male for the same job and that she should talk to Mark Zuckerberg about some required changes in the deal (Lean In 25). She mentions that, she herself shied away from doing so for many days and discusses the manner in which she eventually decide to ask for the revision of the contract.

Sandberg understands the deep rooted fear of negotiation in women. Women do not want to be regarded as nagging and high-headed. Sandberg suggests a solution for the same. She advocates the tactic of 'think personally, act communally' (Lean In 25). Rather than negotiating for their personal wages, she proposes to come out with the fact that men are paid more for the same amount of work than women. This communal approach benefits the person advocating the demand in particular and women in general but it saves one from being regarded as self-serving.

Sandberg admits that such a communal approach will not solve the gender discrimination inherent in society but she believes that this is means to a desirable end for the time being. Studies conducted by researchers like C. Dunlop published in *The Economist* in 2009, Lydia Dishman in 2015 and Julie Zeilinger 's article published in 2016, stand as supporting evidences to the issues of leadership gap, unequal wages, problems of new and expecting mothers and bias against women bosses etc. highlighted by Sandberg. Dunlop conducted his study on women of Switzerland and Chicago and Dishman conducted survey in 19 countries across the globe. The data collected by them correlates the instances mentioned by Sandberg about problems faced by working women in America. Thus, the issues highlighted and debated by Sandberg are faced by women globally, which validates the importance and relevance of Sandberg's work. However, critics like Dunlop and Dishman have just provided data and facts to highlight women's issues whereas Sandberg analyses the data and frames it into a literary work. Along with the book *Lean In*, she has provided women a digital platform in the form of *Lean In.org*.

Arlie Hochschild has studied the perpetuation of gendered roles from historical perspective in her work *The Second Shift*. Her work foregrounds that in 1980s, the majority of women performed dual duties which she terms as 'the second shift'. Women went out to work as men could not earn enough to make both the ends meet. But, women were not paid equally. Women were the victims of economic, social and psychological exploitation. Despite being doubly burdened with work, women were not given their due.

In 1970s, Betty Friedan and white radical feminists like Silvia Federici demanded "wages for housework" to make gendered domestic labour visible and they considered it the unacknowledged backbone of capitalism. In the 1990s, feminist political theorists contested male-centric theories of labour, policy, and citizenship that neglected the gendered division and its uneven consequences. In 2013, the editors of a special issue of the journal *Citizenship Studies* condemned the ongoing lack of attention to biological reproduction, care work, and house management.

Sandberg notices that even in seemingly women-oriented models and theories, men are the primary bread earners and women's economic independence and security is not paid much attention to. She uses research data to argue that there is considerable number of single mothers in the present era, for whom, merely regarding housework as equivalent to office work would not help. Women deserve equal wages and equal work opportunities. It is required to make the

professional world free of prejudices based on gender and for that, women need to conquer their imbibed fears and insecurities and grab leadership positions.

Sandberg states that when she graduated from college in 1991, there were equal number of male and female colleagues. However, as a working woman, she noticed that most of the leaders were males. Initially, she believed that the gap would be abridged with time. But even today, the gap has not been filled and still there are very few women in powerful positions. More often than not, she was the only woman during the meetings held among the entrepreneurs.

She quotes an interesting but disturbing incident when she went for a meeting in Manhattan and was ashamed to find that there was no women's restroom in the corporate office because they never had any women entrepreneurs visiting them before. Such a sad and alarming state of affairs disturbed Sandberg and she realised that the central reason behind this is the manner in which girls are brought up. Women's priorities and beliefs are undergoing a change but the manner in which boys are brought up, think and made to believe remains more or less the same. Until or unless gender stereotypes are re-made, re-thought and revised for both the sexes, there cannot be a stark change in this way our society has developed through the years in which women are seen as secondary, as 'the second sex' in Beauvoirian terms; and man is "the center, the primary and the essential one" (The Second Sex 2).

Sandberg also takes up the issue of gender-labeling at work. She strongly opposes bringing up gender while selecting candidates for promotions. Gender should never be a criterion to judge anyone professionally. Sandberg also brings up the issue of dearth of support and co-ordination among women themselves. She points out the minimal number of women leaders and entrepreneurs sometimes cause un-healthy competition among aspiring women leaders. Here, Sandberg's argument co-relates with the issue of internal contradictions within the field of feminism itself. Sandberg feels that working hand in hand can make it easier for women to grow and progress together as a community.

However, Lean In, being written by a woman of elite class, has invited a lot of criticism. Bell hooks criticised Sandberg's "trickle-down theory," the notion that having more women at the top would make it better for women at the bottom. Hooks opines that Sandberg's book seems to be asking women to work hand in hand with white male corporate elites. Hooks proposes that Sandberg belongs to the class of women who often show more solidarity with wealthy men than they do with poor white women or the women of colour ("Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In" 33).

In her article “Lean In and Sandberg’s Faulty Feminism”, the writer Markie, M. opines that Lean In is a capitalistic book, written by a capitalistic author and promoted by the capitalistic media. According to her, the book was among the best sellers in 2013 because the capitalistic media would definitely promote something that will serve it.

Losse (2013) too presents a similar view in her article. She argues, “Sandberg places a priceless value on labor itself and encourages more of it, whether paid, unpaid, or poorly paid.... It is unfair for workers to do more work without being compensated for it, even in a capitalistic world” (Why Today’s Feminists Are Opting to ‘Lean Out’ Instead n.p).

Another critic Anna Quinlan asks women not to blindly follow Sandberg but to identify what is most important to them. She encourages them to visualise their lives in entirety – not just work but family, hobbies, personal goals, and other interests. In doing this exercise, she finds that many women realise that they have already paid too high a price in the name of their professional success. “You have to know your limit,” Quinlan says, “what’s at risk, and when you’re damaging what’s important to you” (n.p.).

The view that Sandberg is too rich and powerful to be speaking for women of all sections of society is shortsighted; it assumes that any sort of success is antithetical to feminism. The feminists can use their powerful ally, Sandberg, to be able to reach out to more women and to make themselves heard. Having the power and position to speak for herself and other women, Sandberg’s efforts to make a change should be encouraged. As Jessica Valenti says in her article, “Powerful women too have a place in feminism....Sandberg is providing feminists with an incredible opportunity to add to her ideas about women, work and ambition. Do we really want to discard it in favour of unproductive ideological one-upmanship?” (n.p.).

Critics Arnab Gouswami and Paridhi Gupta have praised Lean In for its global appeal and practical relevance. They are of the view, “the author creates an instant connect with her factual information from across the world including India, about gender stereotypes, leadership, parenting and being better human beings” (“Lean In- Women, Work and the Will To Lead” 137) Quinlan adds that the backlashing of feminist leaders is nothing new. Quinlan mentions Gloria Steinem's experience of harsh criticism by her contemporaries in the 1960s and '70s who resented her media popularity. Women of colour and lesbians set out to criticise her for being a woman of ‘elite’ class, not giving her the due credit for her success. She told an interviewer in



2007 to Quinlan, "The hard part was that it made me feel that people didn't think I'd worked. I came to feel that no matter how hard I worked, it would be attributed only to my looks" (n.p.). Sandberg's practical analysis and suggestions appealed to a large number of people, fetching her more than 1.5 million followers on Facebook. Lean In remained on New York Best Seller List for more than two weeks. Sandberg highlights that out of Fortune's top 500 CEOs, only 21 are women and the situation is even worse for women of colour (Lean In 2). She argues that despite gaining the right to education and work, women are absent from the topmost positions and sets out to find reasons for the same. She affirms, "This means that when it comes to making the decisions that affect our world the most, women's voices are not heard equally" (Lean In 2).

To sum up, Sandberg's approach is teleological and is aimed at women empowerment. New economic paradigms have replaced the old ones and services sector has emerged as a major sector, employing maximum number of people, a large number of them being women. All these changes necessitate reconfiguration of the role of women and their overcoming the victim psyche.

Sandberg advocates the highly debated idea that ambition should not be hampered by gendered stereotypes. She points out that gender stereotyping harms both men and women. She does not overlook the burden lies on men as the primary bread winners (Lean In 57-66). Thus, she proposes to establish flexible and reversible roles both at home and at work. Sandberg's ideas are more context based and contemporary. As stated in the chapter "Make Your Partner a Real Partner", Sandberg stresses the fact that the need of the hour is to reconfigure gender roles so as to make lives easy for both men and women. If more women occupy leadership positions and earn better, men too would be freed from the burden of being the primary economic source. In that scenario, men would have the liberty to avail leaves from work in order to spend time with their children without bothering about earning enough to make both the ends meet. That, in turn, would break the stereotype of mothers being the primary care-takers of children and home-makers. Thus, for Sandberg, the change has to be on both the sides and would benefit both the genders.



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