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Book Review: Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*

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Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Knopf, New York, 2013, 240 pp., ISBN: 978-0385349949.

Can a book written by one of Fortune's 50 Most Powerful Women, addressing for the most part women in the US workforce be of any value to the debate on gender inequality in the South Asian workplace context? The answer to this question is a qualified yes.

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. Rather than waiting passively for others to address issues related to inequality, this book exhorts women to "lean in"—to be ambitious, to take charge, to boldly go where not too many women have gone before. This is a refreshing change as rather than lament the ills of "glass ceiling", "sticky floors" and "gender bias" that have hindered the progress of women in the workforce, the book acknowledges the workplace reality that favours men, and then moves the discussion forward by providing concrete ideas and suggestions that would allow women to achieve their true potential.

The book is divided into 12 chapters (the graduate version of the book has six additional chapters offering advice and expert commentary on practical aspects of career such as writing a resume, preparing for an interview, finding the first job, negotiating salary highlights, as well as a guide for listening to one's inner voice and leaning in for women of colour and millennial men). Each chapter highlights challenges women face in the workplace and then, using data and her own experiences, Sandberg makes a case for what women can do to overcome some of those challenges. Written in a conversational style and peppered with anecdotes from her work life as well as those of other well-known women in power, the book also presents hard data and research evidence to back many of the key arguments.

The first chapter titled "The Leadership Ambition Gap" has a provocative subtitle "What Would You Do if You Weren't Afraid?" that underscores Sandberg's key argument of the book that despite all the advances and opportunities that women have enjoyed in the recent decades, they hesitate to take the big steps, partly from fear of failure and fear of going against the norms but also because they have internalized the negative stereotypes. This point is reiterated in chapters "Sit at the Table" and "Don't Leave Before You Leave", where she excoriates women for hedging their bets where their careers are

concerned and letting future roadblocks stymie their progress today. She acknowledges that when the roadblocks do become real, supportive spouse can make all the difference. In “Make Your Partner a Real Partner”, Sandberg advises women to think beyond the traditional gender roles and to involve their spouses in house chores as well as parenting responsibilities. One might say it is easier said than done given how entrenched the gender roles are in most cultures, especially in South Asian countries. But it is still worth pondering as to whether one is engaging in “maternal gatekeeping” that may discourage men from feeling empowered at home. “The Myth of Doing It All” again implores women to shed the unrealistic goals of “doing it all” and perfectionism and instead focus on obtainable goals of “doing what one can” and being happy.

The chapter on “Success and Likability” provides sobering statistics on how career success comes at a cost for women. According to research cited in the book, successful women are disliked not only by men but also by women. The complexities of challenges women face in the workplace do not have any quick fixes. But there is also reason to celebrate. Corporate careers no longer follow a single trajectory where one starts and ends one’s career with one organization and retires with a gold wrist-watch. Changing jobs and sometimes even professions several times over one’s career is the new norm and hence the chapter “It’s a Jungle Gym, Not a Ladder”, introduces new metaphor jungle gym for career progression to replace the traditional corporate ladder analogy. According to Sandberg, this new reality is a good news for women as for most, careers are characterized by fits and starts with breaks as well as opportunities that materialize in non-traditional ways. The caveat is that women need to be ready to embrace uncertainty, take risks, focus on growth and opportunity rather than archaic titles and career levels. But she cautions against following the oft repeated advice on seeking mentoring of people at the top in the next chapter “Are You My Mentor?”. This appears somewhat counter to her overall message of taking charge and boldly seek out opportunities but her reasoning is that effective mentorship calls for a real and earned connection felt on both sides. The take-away is that rather than asking a stranger in a powerful position to serve as a mentor, it may serve a woman better to establish a connection through a specific and well thought out approach. This calls for doing one’s homework, being cognizant of time commitment, and equally importantly, being of value to the other party. Once again the idea is to shed the antiquated notion of who a mentor is because in today’s day and age it could be a person of any gender or any level including somebody sitting in the cubicle next to you.

The chapters “Seek and Speak Your Truth” and “Let’s Start Talking About It” bring the discussion on gender inequality full circle. It is a tacit admission that despite all the expert advice and pep-talk that litters the book, no one person can bring about the sought-out change in her life alone. Rather than a self-help book for an individual woman, this work is more of a wake-up for women urging them to not accept the status quo in their own lives as well as those of others. Women need to speak up and try to bring about the change in beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours that curtail equal opportunities for women. But again, unless those voices are heard and taken seriously, this issue will continue to be a quagmire. The example of how Harvard Business School, in two short years, was able to close the performance gap between males and females (as well as international students) shows the power of speaking up so that once heard how institutions can step up and make real and concrete change possible.

Sandberg utilizes the age-old “what comes first, chicken or the egg” metaphor to frame the discussion on gender issues in the workplace. The chicken argument is about women pushing through the barriers that hinder their progress and then breaking them while the egg argument is about the need to eliminate the barriers so that women can succeed in the workplace. The debate about what needs to

come first is very much relevant in the contemporary South Asian context. For decades, the gender inequality discussion has been dominated by the topics of social, legal, and institutional roadblocks on the road to gender equality. Countries in South Asia are at the cusp of instituting changes in response to recent events such as recent deaths of garment factory workers due to fires in Bangladesh, molestation of women in Delhi, India, among others. The idiom “strike when the iron is hot” is very much applicable here as the gender issue is square and centre in the public eye and taking leadership on this debate has a good chance to make a difference.

There is a huge disconnect in the statistics for women participation in the labour force and women in leadership. While women represent almost half (47 per cent) of the US workforce, women representation is among the lowest in three of the largest South Asian countries. In Pakistan only one out of every five women while in Bangladesh and India one out of every three women are part of the workforce (Likhi, 2013). Compare these figures to the data on women leadership: 11 per cent of the leadership positions in India are held by women as compared to 4 per cent in the US. These statistics highlight the complexities and contradictions in the South Asian countries that call for more than a passionate call for women to lean in to eradicate the ills of gender inequality. The social, cultural and institutional barriers are real roadblocks and so the focus on the chicken as Sandberg calls it, is a refreshing change of dialogue, but there is also a fear that it may burden South Asian women with unrealistic expectations of being the change they want to see.

Lean In became an overnight hit when it was published in 2013 and continues to stir discussion as well as debate. Some discussion is inevitably on the author herself, some questioning her credentials for writing a book she jokingly calls a feminist manifesto, others holding her as a shining example of “having it all” as evidence by the overwhelmingly positive response she and her book received during her visit to India in July of 2014 (Prabhakar, 2014). The naysayers take umbrage to the underlying message of the book: women should stop being passive and stop blaming others for gender inequality and instead take charge of their own careers and shake the tyranny of low expectations. It minimizes the reality for women in many parts of the world, including South Asia where it is a delicate tightrope walk between pursuing one’s career and managing familial as well as societal expectations. Sandberg rightly acknowledges that vast majority of women are working to make ends meet and not necessarily pursuing fulfilling careers. Hence the message of the book may resonate most with those who are privileged either because they have resources, opportunities, and/or support but also those who have reached a leadership position, or those who are fortunate to be in an environment where they will not be unduly penalized if they speak up or take charge or try to make a difference. Yet, I believe this book serves as a beacon of what can be achieved if only women would believe in themselves and aim higher. This message is worth hearing and worth repeating so that it brings awareness and with awareness there is hope for a real dialogue that is needed to spur institutional change.

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