

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Sheryl Sandberg and Gender Differences

Almost exactly fifty years ago, Betty Friedan published her bombshell, *The Feminine Mystique*, which argued, among other things, that traditional gender roles had compartmentalized women as homemakers—both their and culture’s detriment. Arguably, Friedan’s book was the manifesto of the feminist revolution. Laws and cultural norms changed as equal treatment of and more professional opportunities for women increased. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, has just published *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Sandberg’s book is not quite Friedan’s social manifesto, but it is changing the conversation. A few salient facts that demonstrate why Sandberg’s book is an important one: Only 17 of the world’s 195 countries and around 4% of Fortune 500 companies are run by women. Sandberg believes she understands why and proposes to change that. Permit me a few thoughts on this important book, for it says much about where our culture is and how our culture continues to process basic gender differences.

- First, a summary of Sandberg’s basic argument. *The Economist* correctly observes that “she mixes autobiography, sociology and management strategy in her book.” She seeks to explain why so few women reach the top—in the business world and in politics. Her fundamental thesis is that women themselves are responsible: They do not aim high enough; underestimate their own abilities; spend too much time doing housework and caring for their children; and compromise their career goals. She writes: “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.” In short, Sandberg argues that women must bear some, if not a major part, of the blame. She states that “Compared to our male colleagues, fewer of us aspire to senior positions. . . My argument is that getting rid of these internal barriers is critical to gaining power. We can dismantle the hurdles in ourselves today. We can start this very moment.” These internal barriers involve, from birth, an ambition gap and being raised to have different expectations—both of which are lethal for women. [She writes: “The gender stereotypes introduced in childhood are reinforced throughout our lives and become self-fulfilling prophecies.”] Therefore, women “lean back” during meetings, usually not even sitting at the table. “They question their capacity to lead more often than men do, and push less often for promotions or pay raises. Internal research by Hewlett-Packard found that women only apply for jobs for which they feel they are a 100% match; men do so even when they meet no more than 60% of the requirements.” In chapter 8, Sandberg maintains that one of the most important career choices a woman makes is whom to marry. Women need to negotiate shared household duties with their spouses and these need to be reviewed frequently and revised often. If this choice is not taken seriously, a woman might be asked to sacrifice her career to support that of her partner—and that a woman should never do. However, women are not completely at fault. Sandberg does argue that corporate structures and cultures work against women. For example, she cites that US companies are not

required to offer paid maternity leave, let alone paternity leave. In addition, child care costs are rising so rapidly that returning to work after the birth of children is financially difficult if not impossible.

Further, Sandberg uses the phrase “benevolent sexism” to refer to how men continue to treat women differently, without the specific intent to hold them back. To that end, she classifies herself as a “feminist” but defines the term as someone who believes in equal treatment for women. [Indeed, she argues that a “truly equal world would be one where women ran half our countries and companies and men ran half our homes.”] For that reason, Sandberg has also launched a campaign to support and educate career women through online opportunities and support groups. For example, she has launched www.Leanin.org, a non-profit Web platform. This website is intended to get women organized using data, sharing and networking. As *Time* magazine reports, the website also offers a series of video seminars created by Stanford University’s Clayman Institute for Gender Research. Subjects range from body language to negotiating techniques. On the website, women are encouraged to form “Lean In Circles” and are given suggested guidelines to make them effective (e.g., 8 to 10 peers with a commitment to confidentiality as they carry out “listen, ask and share” exercises). More than 120 companies have signed up as partners in forming these Lean in Circles. Therefore, Sandberg is putting an infrastructure in place to provide the tools to empower women to attain places in the corporate boardroom, executive positions in business—and perhaps in the highest positions of political power. *Lean In* is not a lament about the dismal state of women in corporate leadership; it is constructing a path to seize the power structures of all aspects of culture. Seen from that vantage point, it is indeed a manifesto for profound change in America.

- Second, how should we think about this “manifesto?” Two brief comments:
 1. Christina Hoff Sommers has written a most helpful article in the March edition of *The Atlantic* that raises several important points that are relevant to Sandberg’s thesis. Since one of Sandberg’s clear goals is to liberate Americans from the stereotypes of gender, what is social science telling us about gender differences? In a 2008 study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, a group of international researchers compared data on gender and personality across 55 nations. Their findings: “Throughout the world, women tend to be more nurturing, risk averse and emotionally expressive, while men are usually more competitive, risk taking and emotionally flat. But the most fascinating finding is this: Personality differences between men and women are the largest and most robust in the more prosperous, egalitarian and educated societies. . . Higher levels of human development—including long and healthy life, equal access to knowledge and education, and economic wealth—were the main nation-level predictors of sex difference variation across cultures.” Sommers summarizes the conclusions of this important study: “The authors of the study hypothesize that prosperity and equality bring greater opportunities for self-actualization. Wealth, freedom, and education empower men and women to be who they are. . . What if gender difference turns out to be a phenomenon not of oppression, but rather of social well-being?” Sommers cites the disparity between men and women in engineering as an example. Perhaps American women earn fewer degrees in engineering because they do not have to do so. They have more opportunities

to pursue careers that really interest them. Women now earn a majority of Ph.D.'s in the humanities, biology, social sciences and health sciences. As Sommers shows, "Despite 40 years of consciousness-raising and gender-neutral pronouns, most men and women still gravitate to different fields and organize their lives in different ways." In a 2013 national poll on modern parenthood, the Pew Research Center asked mothers and fathers to identify their "ideal" working arrangement. Amazingly, 50% of mothers said they would prefer to work part-time and 11% said they would prefer not to work at all. Of the fathers, 75% said they preferred fulltime work. Sommers writes that "Sandberg seems to believe that the choices of contemporary American women are not truly free. [Indeed Sandberg writes: "True equality will be achieved only when we all fight the stereotypes that hold us back.]" But aren't American women as self-determining as any in the history of humanity? In place of bland-assertions, Sandberg needs to explain why the life choices of educated, intelligent women in liberal, opportunity-rich societies are unfree. And she needs to explain why the choices she promotes will make women happier and more fulfilled."

2. Quoting the Creation Ordinance of Genesis 1-2, Jesus declared, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female. . ." (Matthew 19:4). Jesus made this declaration to a culture with no gender identity or gender difference issues. Instead, He was affirming a basic proposition of the human race: God made the human race in two grand streams—male and female—and they are totally different. No matter what humans try to do, they can never erase this fundamental characteristic of the human race. This simple proposition is quite absent from Sandberg's book—and in that absence is a glaring problem. Perhaps that is the basic reason why, in the pursuit of happiness and in the pursuit of life-fulfilling goals, men and women often take different paths and make different choices. That is not evil and perhaps that is the way God intended it to be. A curriculum of Lean In Circles will not change that. Perhaps the problem Sandberg wants to solve is really not a problem; what she wants to change cannot really be changed. Perhaps the choices women make merely reflect the gender differences in all their complexity and diversity; profound differences rooted deeply in God's Creation Ordinance.

See Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*; Belinda Luscombe, "Confidence Woman," *Time* (18 March 2013), pp. 34-42; Christina Hoff Sommers, "What 'Lean In' Misunderstands about Gender Differences," www.theatlantic.com (20 March 2013) and *The Economist* (16 March 2013), pp. 82-83.