

# Lean In

## Being a Top Girl in a Man's World

By Allie Moss

When Marlene says, “She’s a tough lady, Maggie [referring to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher]. I’d give her a job,” she’s embracing the idea that if women are assertive enough, brave enough—tough enough—they’ll succeed in their chosen field. Sound familiar? It’s the same argument made by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg in her acclaimed book, *Lean In*. The *Lean In* method encourages women to step up to the plate, become conscious of the ways they consistently underperform in the workplace, and build confidence and skills to combat these challenges. Its focus is individual advancement *within* the status quo, instead of systemic changes that would make the workplace more equitable for everyone. For example, in a video tutorial about why women are penalized during salary negotiations, the instructor says, “Until the day comes where we can break our deepest gender stereotypes, we’re giving you practical tips so that you can get the job done.” While these “practical tips” may feel personally empowering, they place the onus entirely on women—and not the companies they work for—to correct sexism and navigate seemingly inevitable gender bias in the workplace.

Psychologists at Duke University recently conducted a study that underscored this point. Two thousand participants were shown different parts of Sandberg’s argument; half were given sections that deal with systemic oppression and the other half were given sections that present “DIY solutions,” such as tips for salary negotiation. The researchers found that the second group was more likely to believe that with the right tools, women have the potential to overcome gender bias in the workplace. The group was also more likely to view correcting gender bias as women’s responsibility—an issue that could and should be fixed by women—and more alarmingly, as a problem caused by women and the way that they “naturally” interact at work. “We are by no means suggesting Sandberg intended to blame women for inequality,” the psychologists note, “But we do fear that *Lean In*’s main message—which emphasizes individual action as a way to address gender inequality—may lead people to view women as having played a greater role in sustaining and even causing gender inequality.”

*Lean In* certainly has its detractors, too—perhaps most famously former First Lady Michelle Obama, who said bluntly, “It’s not always enough to lean in, because that sh\*t doesn’t work all the time.” Former Reddit CEO Ellen Pao recounts in her book the moment she realized Sandberg’s advice was not going to work. Pao had heard Sandberg’s talk encouraging women to claim their seats at the conference table “because no one gets to the corner office by sitting on the side.” When she arrived first for a private, cross-country flight with four male executives, she debated taking one of the four power seats or the couch in the back. As she was about to sit on the couch, “Sheryl’s words echoed in my mind, and I moved to one of the power seats—the fourth, [least powerful,] backward-



Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg chats with cadets on the stage of Arnold Hall, November 6, 2015. Photo by Liz Copan. Courtesy U.S. Air Force.

facing seat, but at the table nonetheless.” During the flight, Pao endured a conversation about porn stars, sex workers, what type of “girls” the men liked, and whether a woman should be on the board of a tech company because “she’s hot.” When the plane landed, her male colleagues ditched her as quick as they could. Pao remembers thinking, “taking your seat at the table doesn’t work so well when no one wants you there.”

What are women to do, then, if individual advocacy is not enough? Pao presents a partial solution: she founded Project Include, which provides companies with recommendations for inclusivity practices that stretch beyond “women’s issues” and aim to tackle intersectional identities. Unlike *Lean In*, this approach shifts the focus onto organizations and tasks *them* with dismantling systems that privilege white male employees. The core tenets of *Lean In*—and that idea of Marlene’s that women will succeed if only they could be “tough” enough—are hard to overcome. The first step may be to recognize these ideas for what they are: the 40-year echo of Marlene’s words, dressed in Sandberg’s sleek black pantsuit instead of a neon blazer with shoulder pads.

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**SOURCES** Grainne Fitzsimons, Aaron Kay, and Jae Yun Kim, “‘Lean In’ Messages and the Illusion of Control,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 30, 2018, [bit.ly/2nhXS8T](https://bit.ly/2nhXS8T) (accessed August 1, 2019); Ellen Pao, “This Is How Sexism Works in Silicon Valley: My Lawsuit Failed. Others Won’t,” *The Cut*, August 21, 2017, [bit.ly/2wvflLw](https://bit.ly/2wvflLw) (accessed August 1, 2019); *Project Include*, [bit.ly/2KbL1Bp](https://bit.ly/2KbL1Bp) (accessed August 1, 2019); Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, “Why Negotiating Is Crucial for Women,” *Lean In*, [bit.ly/2ywQCeR](https://bit.ly/2ywQCeR) (accessed August 1, 2019); Jessica Stillman, “Michelle Obama Just Said ‘Lean In’ Doesn’t Work. Here’s the Study That Proves She’s Right,” *Inc.*, December 7, 2018, [bit.ly/2Kd95E9](https://bit.ly/2Kd95E9) (accessed August 1, 2019)