

Lean Out: How to Dismantle the Corporate Barriers that Hold Women Back

by Maureen F. Fitzgerald, PhD

Preface

“Enough about the glass ceiling. It’s time to redesign the building so that women and men at all levels can be good employees and good family members.” ~ Ellen Bravo

I have always believed in gender equality. I had parents who told me that the sky was the limit. I went to the most prestigious universities and was selected for the most amazing jobs. For the bulk of my career I refused to admit that there were any barriers that held me back.

As an accountant, a lawyer and a professor, I never felt I was being treated unfairly. I was thrilled to earn good money and felt like I was contributing. In fact, I tried to convince younger women that the glass ceiling was all in their minds. I urged women to vigorously compete head-to-head with men and “may the best man win.” I would never admit that I was a feminist or that I had friends who were feminists and I frankly found it distasteful to complain or whine. But then I had my eyes opened.

My Story

Around 10 years ago, at the pinnacle of my law career, I returned to work after a short maternity leave, only to discover that there had been a “re-org.” My boss told me that I had been moved into a new position and would get a minor raise. Although he called it a promotion, it was a mundane job with no growth potential. It required that I report to three (not one) male bosses, two of whom used to be at my level and, to top it off, I was now moved to an interior office with no windows. I felt as though I was being squeezed out of my high-paying job as a lawyer into a tiny box. As a result, my world completely shattered.

All the myths I had told myself for 20 years about equality and fairness came into focus and I could no longer pretend. It was as if all of a sudden I came face to face with all the lies I had lived by.

I felt as if I had been naive or blind. I had fallen hook, line and sinker for the propaganda that women are completely equal. I accepted the lie that because I was a lawyer, I had equal opportunities and unlimited choices.

I did not mind when I didn’t get invited to client lunches. I did not care when all the male lawyers played golf in the middle of the day (even though I could play better than most of them). I did not really notice when my male peers got more of the interesting files. I did not mind that I worked all alone in the office until the wee hours of the morning. I was flattered when I was asked to do pro-bono projects (that men

steered clear of). I silently accepted requests to take notes at meetings and serve coffee, chalking it up to rites of passage.

20/20 Hindsight

Looking back, I see things quite differently. Even as a young star, I was always on my toes, rarely relaxed and often stressed. I worked obscene hours and met ridiculous deadlines. I was kept out of influential meetings and projects. People with fewer skills than me were promoted without explanation. I was constantly working overtime to make up for the time I took off to take my children to the dentist or doctor or teacher professional days. I was overlooked for obvious promotions. I had to fight for the smallest raise. I was given menial work. And when I mentioned this observation to my peers, I usually got a shoulder shrug or a comment like, “Suck it up, buttercup” or “Welcome to the real world.”

And to make matters worse, I blamed myself for all these happenings. I recall often thinking that there must be something terribly wrong with me. Maybe I really was difficult to get along with? Maybe I was not as smart as I thought? Maybe I had offended someone important? And because I thought it was my fault entirely, I dared not complain. I felt ashamed and I lowered my expectations. I lowered my self-esteem, I bent my head down and I worked even harder. I chose to remain blind and convinced myself that I just needed to be faster and tougher.

I had absolutely no idea that there were barriers holding me (and most other women) back and I had no idea how invisible, destructive and resilient they were.

The Missing Piece

Once I began research for this book I quickly realized that I was not alone. This situation was not personal to me. I was simply a cog caught in the wheel of the invisible systems and institutions that hold many women back. Even though as a lawyer I knew about sexism and discrimination, I had no idea of the depth of the problem until I felt the sting on a personal level. It was not until I felt the pain that I decided to write.

In a nutshell, the research on women says this: Women are not the problem. The way we treat women is the problem. Women in our society face expectations and barriers that males do not. Whether at work, at home or in public, women are swimming in a sea of cultural rules that we inherited from our ancestors. And many of them are holding women back.

Although women know at a gut level that they face many obstacles, they do not know how to define them or to deal with them. And sadly, most women are so overworked they do not have the energy to turn their minds to the real things that are limiting their success.

About this Book

In *Lean Out* I shine a light on our corporate culture and the hidden systems that hold women back. I want women to see that it's not their fault they are not progressing as they had hoped. I want them to

know that working harder or smarter will not actually lead to success, at least not in the long term, or it will likely come at a very high cost.

I think of this book as *the other half* of the best-selling book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg. That book mostly urges women to change themselves by being tougher and more courageous if they want to get ahead. *Lean Out* urges both women (and men) to deal with our culture and shatters the thinking that women are mostly to blame for their lack of success. It shifts our focus to our systems, institutions and biases and shows how they are grossly unfair to more than half the population.

It is time to stop burdening women with the blame and responsibility for fixing an entire culture that treats women unfairly. It's time to tell the truth and truly allow women to be all they can be.

My Nightmare

Recently I had a dream about my research and it helped me understand why this book is so important. I dreamed that hundreds of women in all shapes and sizes, wearing brightly colored suits, were blindly walking off a steep cliff, one after another, to their deaths. It seemed to me that no one had told them that there was a cliff or had warned them about the potential dangers in the area. It was as if they had no clue. It reminded me of the joke we used to share in the workplace. When someone clearly offended the boss, we would say, "Didn't you get the memo?" as if we all knew what was really going on. Women are the 50% of the population that did not see what was happening to them because it was not obvious or predictable to them.

Lean Out is that memo – the one that women need and deserve.

A Final Note

This book is the result of my own perfect storm. It is a culmination of my entire life experiences that brought me to this particular point. If I had not practiced law for 20 years I could not have known how badly women are being treated. If I had not been a professor, I could not have conducted years of research, nor would I have had the credentials to have others pay attention. If I had not been a wife and mother I would not have known what women meant when they said they felt like slaves.

Indeed, I think it's fair to say that it took several university degrees, many years of law practice, teaching at two universities, authoring seven books, being a wife and raising two children to get me to the place where I could actually write this book. Not to mention my life-long mission to end sexism and, of course, the thousands of mistakes I made, my many detours and my mindfulness practice. And most importantly, I wish to thank my husband, Mary-Jean Payeur, Catherine Leek, Karin Mizgala, Sandra Herd, Monica Beauregard, Mary Pappajohn, Christine Dearing, Denise Withers, Jennifer Leslie, Christine Unterthiner, Susanne Doyle-Ingram and Darrell Tomkins.

My dream is to have women and men as full partners in all aspects of life – at home, at work and in society. I really hope *Lean Out* makes a difference!

Introduction

“The blunt truth is that men still run the world.” ~ Sheryl Sandberg

Have you ever wondered why men still run the world? Why do men hold about 80% of the most powerful positions in corporations and government? Why are there so many female college graduates yet so few women CEOs and politicians?

While women are integral participants in business and workplaces and are shown to be particularly effective as managers and entrepreneurs, they seem to disappear as we glance up the corporate and societal ladders. Catalyst, an international think tank that tracks women’s progress, has repeatedly documented the significant benefits women contribute – from participation on corporate boards to customer service – all improving corporate performance, yet women are still absent in the highest positions of influence (see Appendix A: The Business Case for Advancing Women).

We think that women are advancing, but are they really? We think that women just need to work a bit harder to get those top positions and we just need a few more women in the pipeline in order to balance out the numbers.

But this is simply not true. Despite the promises of feminism, women today are by no stretch equal or powerful. Women continue to fall behind at work, at home and in society, and men are continuing to leap ahead. Men continue to hold the bulk of power while women are encouraged to take part-time work or stay at home and care for children, even though many have no option but to work.

In her best-selling book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, beautifully describes the many barriers that hold women back and recounts the depressing statistics about women falling off corporate ladders. In her Preface Sandberg lists the obstacles women face, including “blatant and subtle sexism, discrimination and sexual harassment. Too few workplaces offer the flexibility and access to child care and parental leave that are necessary for pursuing a career while raising children. Men have an easier time finding mentors and sponsors who are invaluable for career progression. Plus women have to prove themselves to a far greater extent than men do.”

Yet Sandberg chose to focus on women rather than institutional barriers. She urges women to be tougher, stronger and more courageous if they want to get ahead. As she says, “I am encouraging women to address the chicken [individual barriers] but I fully support those who are focusing on the egg [institutional barriers].” Like other women before her, she encourages women to work harder and “find balance” rather than focus on the corporate culture, systems, policies and our outdated ideas about women that prevent women from being truly powerful.

Unlike Sandberg, I do not ask women to become better climbers. I ask them to look at the ladder and question how it was built. Why is there a ladder at all and why is it so hard for women to climb? Why does it hold so many women back and yet propel so many men to the top?

Although self-help can be beneficial, history shows that this is not enough, and it may actually be causing the stagnation. As women go about “leaning in,” the bigger and more resistant barriers facing

women remain untouched. Not only do corporate institutions and policies flourish, but by continuing to call it a “women’s issue” rather than a societal or corporate issue, we burden women with both the responsibility and burden of trying to make things better.

In their extensively researched book, *What Works for Women at Work*, Professor Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey summarize and synthesize almost all of the academic research on this topic and conclude in no uncertain terms that the main reason women are not progressing is not because they are not working hard enough or there is something wrong with them. It is due to powerful biases and barriers.

Williams and Dempsey also ask women to work within the system but become more “politically savvy” in order to survive. They suggest things like: stand your ground (with softeners); laugh it off; get over yourself; present solutions, not problems; and manage your anger. Here is an example of their advice: “Angry women can trigger stereotypes of high powered females as ball-breakers or alternatively as hormonal nutcases – making it all the more important for women to remain in control of their anger rather than allowing it to control them.”

In defense of taking a self-help approach, they state in their Conclusion, “This book has focused on what women can do for themselves because Joan decided that after working on institutional solutions for 15 years, organizations are changing so slowly that women need the tools now to navigate the world as they find it. But the real solution is to level the playing field.”

As you will learn here, the real culprit is precisely the “playing field” that consists of our outdated mind-sets and the culture we inherited. Women suffer, not because they are incompetent, weak or lazy, but because we built a society and institutions that hold them back.

These are the things we never learned as we were growing up. Our mothers never told us, our teachers never told us, nor did our bosses or mentors. In this state of ignorance, we had no idea that we would become willing players, not just accepting but also promoting the status quo. This is a terrible shame.

It’s time to stop blaming women and get to the heart of not just *how* women are being held back, but *why*. We need to learn to recognize the barriers but, just as importantly, understand why these barriers were constructed in the first place and why they are so hard to dismantle. We then need to work diligently on challenging each and every one of them if we truly want women to succeed. END