

To Close the Gender Gap, What Needs to Change -- Women or the System?

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Growing up in a suburb of Boston in the 1960s, Ilene Gordon had to ask for special permission from her junior high school principal to get out of home economics and take shop, where she was the only girl in the class. She went to MIT intending to be a high school math teacher, but decided instead to get her business degree at the Sloan School of Management. She became the first female executive officer at Tenneco, a replacement parts company headquartered in Lake Forest, Ill., and at the age of 45, was appointed the first female board member at Zenith Electronics.

"I thrived on being a pioneer," she says. "Throughout my career, I've always had a can-do attitude."

Today, as chairman, president and CEO of Ingredion -- the Westchester, Ill.-based ingredient manufacturer whose sales last year were \$6.5 billion -- Gordon is the ultimate pioneer, one of 21 women heading a Fortune 500 company. She admits that progress for women in the corporate world has been slow, but she is hopeful about the future.

"I was at a dinner recently with many of the other [female CEOs of the Fortune 500]," she says. "We got our MBAs 30 years ago; we've run businesses and now we're running major corporations. Many of us have children; now we're having grandchildren. It's a symbol of where we are. We have the experience, and there are women behind us who will come through."

In many ways, Gordon -- in her personal career and her public role as head of a major company -- embodies both sides of the current debate about how to rectify the dearth of women leaders in Corporate America and government.

In one corner is Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook and author of *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, a new book that encourages young women to be more ambitious. Sandberg shines a spotlight on how women impede their professional progress by backing away from challenges. In the other corner is Anne-Marie Slaughter, a Princeton professor and former State Department official, who last year wrote a cover story for *The Atlantic* magazine titled, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," which has since become the most read article in the magazine's history. The essay -- being turned by Slaughter into a book -- argues that [women's careers are stunted because the U.S. workplace is not parent-friendly](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3181) (<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3181>).

Gordon is an example of a woman who has "leaned in." Early in her career, she sought and found mentors; she volunteered for demanding posts, including ones overseas; when her children were young, she hired a live-in nanny to help run her household. And yet, as a female CEO in the male dominated manufacturing industry, she is also keenly aware that companies must do more to recruit, retain and promote women. (Half of Ingredion's executives are women, including the chief financial officer. Three of the company's 10 board members are women.)

"Women have to be determined, and they need to be creative in how they get things done," she says, adding that at the same time, "the company has to create the environment to be supportive and make it work."

As the argument continues about how to increase the number of women in top positions, many of those very women have weighed in. In *The Wall Street Journal*, Arianna Huffington, editor of *The Huffington Post*, wrote that "the world needs women to redefine success beyond money and power" into a metric that is "about living the life you want, not just the life you settle for." In *The New York Times*, Erin Callan, the former CFO at Lehman Brothers, laments that her "singular focus on [her] career" ruined her marriage and kept her from having children. She is now 47, remarried and trying to conceive via in vitro fertilization. Meanwhile, MARRISA MAYER, the CEO of Yahoo, inadvertently entered this debate with her decision to call her work-from-home employees back into the office -- [a move that seemed to undermine women who require flexibility](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3208) (<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3208>).

Even for women who don't necessarily dream of becoming a Facebook executive or a State Department official but who still want or need to make money, contribute to society and have a varied professional career, the current debate leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Where does the primary responsibility to fix this problem lie? Is it up to women to face down self-doubts that hold them back? Or is the onus on big companies to confront the institutional gender biases that keep women from advancing?

"On one hand, all of this debate about who's right and who's wrong is fruitful because it's part of parsing through the details of how best to confront discrimination and gender inequity," notes [Stewart Friedman \(https://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1318/\)](https://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1318/), director of the [Wharton Work/Life Integration Project \(http://worklife.wharton.upenn.edu/\)](http://worklife.wharton.upenn.edu/). "On the other hand, it's a false feud that pits the views of Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter against each other."

He views the existence of this widespread conversation as cause for optimism. "There is a revolution happening now," he says. "We have reached a new level of consciousness."

'Tendencies That Hold Us Back'

Women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988. They make up about 47% of law students and 32% of students in full-time MBA programs, with the percentage being even higher at elite schools. Women represent 50% of the labor force, yet the numbers of women leaders in government and business remain low. Women hold 16.6% of board seats at Fortune 500 companies; one tenth of those companies have no women serving on their boards, according to Catalyst, a non-profit group that works to expand opportunities for women in business. Women represent 18% of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and 20% of the U.S. Senate. The fact that these numbers have barely budged in a decade is partly what prompted Sandberg to write *Lean In*. "The blunt truth," she writes, "is that men still run the world."

Sandberg recognizes that there is a "chicken and egg argument" about which should come first to correct this situation: Should we focus on biases within organizations or on women's "internal impediments?" She chooses to concentrate on the latter. Mixing personal anecdotes with academic research, her book offers women advice on how to advocate for themselves at work. She gives specific tips on how to negotiate a higher salary (for example, acknowledge that men are paid more as the reason for not accepting the first offer) as well as suggestions on how to communicate more assertively (it starts by sitting at the table -- not around the edges of the room).

This is not to say Sandberg completely ignores the ways in which women are marginalized by unconscious biases. She cites, for instance, a 2011 study by McKinsey showing that women are promoted based on past accomplishments whereas men are promoted based on their potential. Her book has already served as a wake-up call to some corporate executives. John Chambers, CEO of Cisco, read *Lean In* and subsequently met with Sandberg to discuss the issues it raises. In a leaked email to employees, Chambers wrote: "While I have always considered myself sensitive to, and effective on, gender issues in the workplace, my eyes were opened in new ways, and I feel a renewed sense of urgency to make the progress we haven't made in the last decade.... What we have been doing hasn't worked, and it is time to adjust."

But some have derided Sandberg as a wealthy elitist. *Forbes* pegs her net worth at roughly \$500 million. Even those who are generally supportive note that her perspective is irrelevant to most women. "Sandberg really is not talking about the average, middle-class woman and I am not sure she realizes this, which is why she is getting a backlash," says [Janice Bellace, \(https://lgst.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1105/\)](https://lgst.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1105/) professor of legal studies and business ethics at Wharton. "Her focus actually is on upper middle class women."

According to the U.S. Census, the median annual earnings for full-time, year-round women workers in 2010 were \$36,931, Bellace notes. "This puts into perspective the difficulty the average woman has in following Sandberg's advice," she says.

Others, including Kathy Korman Frey, entrepreneur in residence at The George Washington University School of Business, defend Sandberg as an empowering leader with a "You go, girl!" sensibility. "Sheryl Sandberg isn't trying to make us all feel bad," she says, adding that "Sandberg has created a playbook to succeed in the big sandbox. The book is for somebody who wants to get to the top of her field or pursue a goal vigorously. It's an operating manual. Talk this way; do that; you'll meet your goal. It's incredibly helpful."

According to Sandberg, women hold themselves back by lacking self-confidence, lowering their career expectations and taking on more than their share of domestic duties at home. "What's inspiring to me is that Sandberg highlights that while there are very real barriers to women in the workplace, some of them are external but some of them we [bring on] ourselves," notes Wharton management professor [Nancy Rothbard \(https://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1355/\)](https://mgmt.wharton.upenn.edu/profile/1355/). "We need to have the self-reflection to acknowledge what we may be doing to hamper our own success as well. We need to be aware of what tendencies we have that hold us back."

She cites research by Linda Babcock, a professor at the Heinz School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University, that shows that men are significantly more likely than women to use negotiation to promote their own interests. "When women don't ask, that becomes a barrier in and of itself," says Rothbard.

One of the main themes of Sandberg's advice is: "Don't leave before you leave," meaning: Don't question your capacity to juggle work and family and lose out on promotions before you have even become a mother. The idea is that by assuming you can combine a career with children, you naturally step forward -- or "lean in" -- and succeed at work, which puts you in a prime position to ask your employer for what you need later on.

"Many women try to prepare for every eventuality," says Elissa Ellis-Sangster, executive director of the Forté Foundation, an Austin, Texas-based organization for women business

leaders. "They don't put themselves out for a job promotion because they might decide to have children in the next few years. I have seen that time and time again. I've been at conferences where college women will stand up and say: 'Work/life balance is important to me; which career should I pursue?'"

That premise is a problem, notes Ellis-Sangster. Women are "walking away from opportunities. Women need to embrace where they are and the opportunities that are right in front of them. Women opt out before it's time for them to, or it's even necessary to. They need to focus on being successful, making an impact, embracing what they're good at and then worrying about work/life balance when the time is right."

'The System Is Unfair'

Slaughter, who has spent most of her working life as an academic, focuses on the ways in which organizations hinder women's advancement. Until she got to Washington, D.C. -- where she served as director of policy planning under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- she didn't realize how privileged she was: Tenured faculty may work hard, but they have a lot of control over when and how they work. In contrast, autonomy and flexibility do not exist in many other jobs at both high and low levels. In her essay for *The Atlantic*, Slaughter writes that she left the State Department because of her "desire to be with [her] family and [her] conclusion that juggling high-level government work with the needs of two teenage boys was not possible."

Slaughter concludes that the "time macho" U.S. workplace is not parent-friendly which, because of the social pressures that weigh on women to be at home, affects women more than it does men. What's needed, she says, is for companies and government to adopt flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and progressive leave policies. The organizations have to change, not the workers. "Now is the time to revisit the assumption that women must rush to adapt to the 'man's world' that our mothers and mentors warned us about," she writes.

By focusing on the gender biases embedded in organizations, Slaughter puts the onus on employers. Some say that Sandberg's opposite approach gives companies a pass for not addressing the problem of gender inequity. "[Implicit in Sandberg's argument] is that women should take the system for granted," states Lotte Bailyn, professor of organization studies at MIT Sloan. "Sandberg isn't saying: 'Change the system.' She is saying: 'This is a masculine system, and we as women have to accommodate. Let's fix the women.' In the long run, it's a no-win situation."

In many companies and government organizations, long hours and lack of a personal life are seen as badges of honor. "[Former Lehman Brothers CFO] Erin Callan presents a very sad story," says Bailyn, who studies the relationship between managerial practice and employees' lives. "But I've heard a similar story from many male academics and executives. They spent all their lives at the office, and they don't know their children. There's that old question: What do you want on your tombstone? Do you want it to say that you were a loving father or that you were a good employee?"

Marilyn Tam, former CEO of the hair and skincare company Aveda and author of *The Happiness Choice*, understands this better than most. Her former vice president used to call her "the woman without a life." He was only half-joking. "We cannot have it all. Nobody can," she says. "There is a tendency for women who have made it to blame the victim. It's sort of like saying: 'You're not working hard enough.' Most women do not have [choices]. If we tell them to 'lean in, and it will all be perfect,' it blames the victim for not fighting back harder. I have a lot of respect for what Sheryl's doing, but 'having it all' is a fallacy."

Organizations can do a few basic things to increase the number of women leaders, according to Joe Keefe, president and CEO of Pax World Management, the Boston-based asset management firm, and a vocal advocate for greater diversity in the corporate boardroom. He cites personal experience. Pax World is a small company with 50 employees. Whenever there is a job opening, Keefe tells the executive search firm that the finalist pool must include qualified women. As a result, the company has seven senior vice presidents, four of whom are women, and half of its funds are managed by women. "We have no quotas; we always hire the best candidate, but lo and behold, we hire a lot of women," he states.

Appointing more women leaders is "the right thing to do and the smart thing to do," Keefe says, citing the growing body of research showing that the inclusion of women on a given management team can have a meaningful impact on a company's bottom line. One study, by researchers at MIT Sloan School and Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business, found that teams that included more women tended to perform better than those with fewer women.

"I have a lot of admiration for Sheryl Sandberg, but we should be careful [not to] put too much onus on women," he adds. "We have to acknowledge that there is still gender inequality and vestiges of discrimination that are built into the system and our society. It's fine to lean in, and people should [do that], but we have to recognize that the system is unfair, and it needs to be tackled."

'A Human Issue'

It's been 50 years since Betty Friedan wrote her feminist classic, *The Feminine Mystique*, and the debate about women and their roles in society and the workplace is still as heated as ever. But regardless of whether it's the women or system that need to change (or indeed both), Sandberg and Slaughter miss one critical point, according to Wharton's Friedman. "Having it all is not just a women's issue," he says. "It's a human issue that has social, economic and

psychological consequences."

Against a backdrop of dramatic advancements in digital technology that give us more choices for where, when and how we work, our social and personal lives are changing. In 1970, the median age of first marriage for women in the U.S. was 20.8 and for men it was 23.2; today it is 26.5 for women and 28.7 for men, according to the U.S. Census. People are having children later, too. In 1970, 1 in 100 first children were born to mothers who were 35 or older. Today, it's one in 12.

The role of mothers and fathers is changing as well. Trends in time use dating back to 1965 indicate how greater participation of women in the workforce has changed the amount of time mothers devote to paid work, according to Pew research published earlier this month. In 2011, mothers spent, on average, 21 hours per week on paid work, up from eight hours in 1965. The amount of time mothers spend on non-paid work has decreased over the same period. Fathers now spend more time doing housework and tending to children than they did half a century ago. They have not caught up to mothers, but there has been some gender convergence in the way they split their time between their jobs and their families, according to the report. (It should be noted that both Sandberg and Slaughter advocate that women choose their spouses wisely.)

"Men are searching for new models," says Friedman. "They want to be involved and engaged fathers, and they want to support their spouses in their careers, in part because today's young women, compared to 20 years ago, are more focused on their careers. Young men and women see their futures differently than prior generations. They see more options at work and at home."

With all the noise and media chatter, the reason for the debate can sometimes get lost. Companies are losing out on talented women because their workplaces are not accommodating women's lives, and women are losing out on rewarding careers because they lack self-confidence.


"The cost," says Ilene Gordon, the CEO of Ingredion, "is that these women could have great careers; they're giving up an opportunity" to be leaders.


Additional Reading

[Anne-Marie Slaughter: Forget 'Having It All' -- Own What You Want: Knowledge@Wharton \(http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3181\)](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3181)

[Why Do Women Still Earn Less Than Men? Analyzing the Search for High-paying Jobs: Knowledge@Wharton \(http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3058\)](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=3058)

[At Dubai Forum, Arab Female Entrepreneurs Are Urged to Break from Traditional Choices: Arabic Knowledge@Wharton \(http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/arabic/article.cfm?articleid=2820\)](http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/arabic/article.cfm?articleid=2820)

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