

perform worse. Stereotype threat discourages girls and women from entering technical fields and is one of the key reasons that so few study computer science. As a Facebook summer intern once told me, “In my school’s computer science department, there are more Daves than girls.”

The stereotype of a working woman is rarely attractive. Popular culture has long portrayed successful working women as so consumed by their careers that they have no personal life (think Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl* and Sandra Bullock in *The Proposal*). If a female character divides her time between work and family, she is almost always harried and guilt ridden (think Sarah Jessica Parker in *I Don’t Know How She Does It*). And these characterizations have moved beyond fiction. A study found that of Millennial men and women who work in an organization with a woman in a senior role, only about 20 percent want to emulate her career.

This unappealing stereotype is particularly unfortunate since most women have no choice but to remain in the workforce. About 41 percent of mothers are primary breadwinners and earn the majority of their family’s earnings. Another 23 percent of mothers are co-breadwinners, contributing at least a quarter of the family’s earnings. The number of women supporting families on their own is increasing quickly; between 1973 and 2006, the proportion of families headed by a single mother grew from one in ten to one in five. These numbers are dramatically higher in Hispanic and African-American families. Twenty-seven percent of Latino children and 52 percent of African-American children are being raised by a single mother.

Our country lags considerably behind others in efforts to ³⁵ help parents take care of their children and stay in the workforce. Of all the industrialized nations in the world, the United States is the only one without a paid maternity leave policy.

As Ellen Bravo, director of the Family Values @ Work consortium, observed, most “women are not thinking about ‘having it all,’ they’re worried about losing it all—their jobs, their children’s health, their families’ financial stability—because of the regular conflicts that arise between being a good employee and a responsible parent.”

For many men, the fundamental assumption is that they can have both a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life. For many women, the assumption is that trying to do both is difficult at best and impossible at worst. Women are surrounded by headlines and stories warning them that they cannot be committed to both their families and careers. They are told over and over again that they have to choose, because if they try to do too much, they’ll be harried and unhappy. Framing the issue as “work-life balance”—as if the two were diametrically opposed—practically ensures work will lose out. Who would ever choose work over life?

The good news is that not only can women have both families and careers, they can *thrive* while doing so. In 2009, Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober published *Getting to 50/50*, a comprehensive review of governmental, social science, and original research that led them to conclude that children, parents, and marriages can all flourish when both parents have full careers. The data plainly reveal that sharing financial and child-care responsibilities leads to less guilty moms, more involved dads, and thriving children. Professor Rosalind Chait Barnett of Brandeis University did a comprehensive review of studies on work-life balance and found that women who participate in multiple roles actually have lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of mental well-being. Employed women reap rewards including greater financial security, more stable marriages, better health, and, in general, increased life satisfaction.

It may not be as dramatic or funny to make a movie about a woman who loves both her job and her family, but that would be a better reflection of reality. We need more portrayals of women as competent professionals and happy mothers—or even happy professionals and competent mothers. The current negative images may make us laugh, but they also make women unnecessarily fearful by presenting life's challenges as insurmountable. Our culture remains baffled: *I don't know how she does it.*

Fear is at the root of so many of the barriers that women face. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making the wrong choice. Fear of drawing negative attention. Fear of overreaching. Fear of being judged. Fear of failure. And the holy trinity of fear: the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter.

Without fear, women can pursue professional success and 40 personal fulfillment—and freely choose one, or the other, or both. At Facebook, we work hard to create a culture where people are encouraged to take risks. We have posters all around the office that reinforce this attitude. In bright red letters, one declares, “Fortune favors the bold.” Another insists, “Proceed and be bold.” My favorite reads, “What would you do if you weren't afraid?”

In 2011, Debora Spar, president of Barnard College, an all-women's liberal arts school in New York City, invited me to deliver its commencement address. This speech was the first time I openly discussed the leadership ambition gap. Standing on the podium, I felt nervous. I told the members of the graduating class that they should be ambitious not just in pursuing their dreams but in aspiring to become leaders in their fields. I knew this message could be misinterpreted as my judging women for not making the same choices that I have. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I believe that choice means choice for all of us. But I also believe that we need to do more to encourage

Lean In: What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?

women to reach for leadership roles. If we can't tell women to aim high at a college graduation, when can we?

As I addressed the enthusiastic women, I found myself fighting back tears. I made it through the speech and concluded with this:

You are the promise for a more equal world. So my hope for everyone here is that after you walk across this stage, after you get your diploma, after you go out tonight and celebrate hard—you then will lean way in to your career. You will find something you love doing and you will do it with gusto. Find the right career for you and go all the way to the top.

As you walk off this stage today, you start your adult life. Start out by aiming high. Try—and try hard.

Like everyone here, I have great hopes for the members of this graduating class. I hope you find true meaning, contentment, and passion in your life. I hope you navigate the difficult times and come out with greater strength and resolve. I hope you find whatever balance you seek with your eyes wide open. And I hope that you—yes, you—have the ambition to lean in to your career and run the world. Because the world needs you to change it. Women all around the world are counting on you.

So please ask yourself: What would I do if I weren't afraid? And then go do it.

As the graduates were called to the stage to collect their diplomas, I shook every hand. Many stopped to give me a hug. One young woman even told me I was “the baddest bitch” (which, having checked with someone later, actually did turn out to be a compliment).

I know my speech was meant to motivate them, but they actually motivated me. In the months that followed, I started thinking that I should speak up more often and more publicly

about these issues. I should urge more women to believe in themselves and aspire to lead. I should urge more men to become part of the solution by supporting women in the workforce and at home. And I should not just speak in front of friendly crowds at Barnard. I should seek out larger, possibly less sympathetic audiences. I should take my own advice and be ambitious.

Joining the Conversation

1. Sheryl Sandberg argues that women are on the whole still raised to be less ambitious than men and that they should be encouraged to aim more for leadership roles. What evidence does she provide for this so-called “leadership ambition gap”? What factors does she say cause this gap?
2. Sandberg mentions her grandmother, who was a successful businesswoman, as well as her mother, who dropped out of a Ph.D. program to be a “stay-at-home parent.” How do these personal details support her argument?
3. According to Sandberg, the media stereotype of a working woman is “rarely attractive” (paragraph 33). Do you agree? Think of some examples of successful working women in movies and television. How do these examples support or contradict Sandberg’s claim?
4. How do you think Sandberg might respond to Saul Kaplan’s argument in “The Plight of Young Males” (pp. 732–35)?
5. According to Sandberg, most American girls are led to have modest career expectations and to focus more on having a family, while boys are typically raised to aim for leadership positions. Has this been your experience? Write an essay responding to what she says, drawing from your own experience and the readings in this chapter as support for what you say.