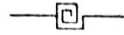


Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In

BELL HOOKS



A YEAR AGO, few folks were talking about Sheryl Sandberg. Her thoughts on feminism were of little interest. More significantly, there was next-to-no public discussion of feminist thinking and practice. Rarely, if ever, was there any feminist book mentioned as a bestseller and certainly not included on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Those of us who have devoted lifetimes to teaching and writing theory, explaining to the world the ins and outs of feminist thinking and practice, have experienced that the primary audience for our work is an academic sub-culture. In recent years, discussions of feminism have not evoked animated passion in audiences. We were far more likely to hear that we are living in a post-feminist society

BELL HOOKS is an author and activist who teaches at Berea College, in Kentucky. She has written numerous books, including *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), and *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). Born Gloria Jean Watkins, she changed her name to honor her mother and grandmother. She says she chose not to capitalize the name because "it is the substance of my books, not who is writing them, that is important." This essay, a response to Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, appeared on the blog *The Feminist Wire* on October 28, 2013.

than to hear voices clamoring to learn more about feminism. This seems to have changed with Sandberg's book *Lean In*, holding steady on the *Times* bestseller list for more than sixteen weeks.

No one was more surprised than long-time advocates of feminist thinking and practice to learn via mass media that a new high priestess of feminist movement was on the rise. Suddenly, as if by magic, mass media brought into public consciousness conversations about feminism, reframing the scope and politics through an amazing feat of advertising. At the center of this drama was a young, high-level corporate executive, Sheryl Sandberg, who was dubbed by Oprah Winfrey and other popular culture pundits as "the new voice of revolutionary feminism." *Forbes Magazine* proclaimed Sandberg to be one of the most influential women in the world, if not the most. *Time Magazine* ranked her one of a hundred of the most powerful and influential world leaders. All over mass media, her book *Lean In* has been lauded as a necessary new feminist manifesto.

Yet Sandberg confesses to readers that she has not been a strong advocate of feminist movement; that like many women of her generation, she hesitated when it came to aligning herself with feminist concerns. She explains:

I headed into college believing that the feminists of the sixties and seventies had done the hard work of achieving equality for my generations. And yet, if anyone had called me a feminist I would have quickly corrected that notion. . . . On one hand, I started a group to encourage more women to major in economics and government. On the other hand, I would have denied being in any way, shape, or form a feminist. None of my college friends thought of themselves as feminists either. It saddens me to admit that we did not see the backlash against women around us. . . . In our defense, my friends and I truly, if naively, believed that the world did not need feminists anymore.



bell hooks

Although Sandberg revised her perspective on feminism, she did not turn towards primary sources (the work of feminist theorists) to broaden her understanding. In her book, she offers a simplistic description of the feminist movement based on women gaining equal rights with men. This construction of simple categories (women and men) was long ago challenged by visionary feminist thinkers, particularly individual black women/women of color. These thinkers insisted that everyone acknowledge and understand the myriad ways race, class, sexuality, and many other aspects of identity and difference made explicit that there was never and is no simple homogenous gendered identity that we could call “women” struggling to be equal with men. In fact, the reality was and is that privileged white women often experience a greater sense of solidarity with men of their same class than with poor white women or women of color.

Sandberg's definition of feminism begins and ends with the 5 notion that it's all about gender equality within the existing social system. From this perspective, the structures of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy need not be challenged. And she makes it seem that privileged white men will eagerly choose to extend the benefits of corporate capitalism to white women who have the courage to "lean in." It almost seems as if Sandberg sees women's lack of perseverance as more the problem than systemic inequality. Sandberg effectively uses her race and class power and privilege to promote a narrow definition of feminism that obscures and undermines visionary feminist concerns.

Contrast her definition of feminism with the one I offered more than twenty years ago in *Feminist Theory From Margin To Center* and then again in *Feminism Is For Everybody*. Offering a broader definition of feminism, one that does not conjure up a battle between the sexes (i.e. women against men), I state: "Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." No matter their standpoint, anyone who advocates feminist politics needs to understand the work does not end with the fight for equality of opportunity within the existing patriarchal structure. We must understand that challenging and dismantling patriarchy is at the core of contemporary feminist struggle—this is essential and necessary if women and men are to be truly liberated from outmoded sexist thinking and actions.

Ironically, Sandberg's work would not have captured the attention of progressives, particularly men, if she had not packaged the message of "lets go forward and work as equals within white male corporate elites" in the wrapping paper of feminism. In the "one hundred most influential people in the world" issue of *Time Magazine*, the forty-three-year old

Facebook COO was dubbed by the doyenne of women's liberation movement Gloria Steinem in her short commentary with the heading "feminism's new boss." That same magazine carried a full page ad for the book *Lean In: Women, Work, and The Will to Lead* that carried the heading "Inspire the Graduate in Your Life" with a graduating picture of two white females and one white male. The ad included this quote from Sandberg's commencement speech at Barnard College in 2011: "I hope that you have the ambition to lean in to your career and run the world. Because the world needs you to change it." One can only speculate whether running the world is a call to support and perpetuate first world imperialism. This is precisely the type of feel good declaration Sandberg makes that in no way clarifies the embedded agenda she supports.

Certainly, her vision of individual women leaning in at the corporate table does not include any clear statements of which group of women she is speaking to and about, and the "lean in" woman is never given a racial identity. If Sandberg had acknowledged that she was primarily addressing privileged white women like herself (a small group working at the top of the corporate hierarchy), then she could not have portrayed herself as sharing a message, indeed a life lesson, for *all* women. Her basic insistence that gender equality should be important to all women and men is an insight that all folks involved in feminist movement agree is a central agenda. And yes, who can dispute the facts Sandberg offers as evidence; despite the many gains in female freedom, implicit gender bias remains the norm throughout our society. Patriarchy supports and affirms that bias. But Sandberg offers readers no understanding of what men must do to unlearn sexist thinking. At no point *In Lean In* does she let readers know what would motivate patriarchal white males in a corporate environment

to change their belief system or the structures that support gender inequality.

Readers who only skim the surface of Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* will find much they can agree with. Very few if any professional women will find themselves at odds with a fellow female who champions the cause gender equality, who shares with us all the good old mother wisdom that one of the most important choices any of us will make in life is who we will partner with. And she shares that the best partner is one who she tells readers will be a helpmeet—one who cares and shares. Sandberg's insistence that men participate equally in parenting is no new clarion call. From its earliest inception, the feminist movement called attention to the need for males to participate in parenting; it let women and men know that heteronormative relationships where there was gender equality not only lasted but were happier than the sexist norm.

Sandberg encourages women to seek high-level corporate ¹⁰ jobs and persevere until they reach the top. For many individual women, Sandberg telling them that they would not be betraying family if they dedicated themselves to work was affirming. It is positive in that it seemed to be a necessary response to popular anti-feminist backlash, which continually suggests that the feminist push to place more women in the workforce was and is a betrayal of marriage and family.

Unfortunately her voice is powerful, yet Sandberg is for the most part not voicing any new ideas. She is simply taking old ideas and giving them a new twist. When the book *Lean In* began its meteoric rise, which continues to bring fame and notoriety to Sandberg, many prominent feminists and/or progressive women denounced the work, vehemently castigating Sandberg. However, there was just one problematic issue at the core of the anti-Sandberg movement; very few folks attacking

the work had actually read the book. Some of them had heard sound bites on television or had listened to her Ted Talk presentation. Still others had seen her interviewed. Many of these older female feminist advocates blatantly denounced the work and boldly announced their refusal to read the book.

As a feminist cultural critic, I found the eagerness with which Sandberg was viciously attacked disheartening. These critiques seem to emerge from misplaced rage not based solely on contempt for her ideas, but a rage bordering on envy. The powerful white male-dominated mass media was giving her and those ideas so much attention. There was no in-depth discussion of why this was the case. In the book Sandberg reminds readers that, "men still run the world." However, she does not discuss white male supremacy. Or the extent to which globalization has changed the makeup of corporate elites. In Mark Mizruchi's book *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite*, he describes a corporate world that is made up of a "more diverse crowd," one that is no longer white and male "blue chip dudes." He highlights several examples: "The CEO of Coca-Cola is Muhtar Kent, who was born in the United States but raised in Turkey; PepsiCo is run by Indra Nooyi, an Indian woman who came to America in her twenties. Burger King's CEO is Brazilian, Chrysler's CEO is Italian, and Morgan Stanley's CEO is Australian. Forget about influencing policy; many of today's leading US CEO's can't even vote here." Perhaps, even in the corporate world, imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is ready to accept as many white women as necessary to ensure white dominance. Race is certainly an invisible category in Sandberg's corporate fantasy world.

Sandberg is most seductive when sharing personal anecdotes. It is these true-life stories that expose the convenient lies underlying most of her assertions that as more women are

at the top, all women will benefit. She explains: "Conditions for all women will improve when there are more women in leadership roles giving strong and powerful voice to their needs and concerns." This unsubstantiated truism is brought to us by a corporate executive who does not recognize the needs of pregnant women until it's happening to her. Is this a case of narcissism as a potential foundation for female solidarity? No behavior in the real world of women relating to women proves this to be true. In truth, Sandberg offers no strategies for the building of feminist solidarity between women.

She makes light of her ambivalence towards feminism. Even though Sandberg can humorously poke fun at herself and her relationship to feminism, she tells readers that her book "is not a feminist manifesto." Adding as though she is in a friendly conversation with herself, "okay, it is sort of a feminist manifesto." This is just one of the "funny" folksy moments in the book, which represent her plain and ordinary approach—she is just one of the girls. Maybe doing the book and talking about it with co-writer Nell Scovell provides the basis for the conversational tone. Good humor aside, cute quips and all, it is when she is talking about feminism that many readers would have liked her to go deeper. How about just explaining what she means by "feminist manifesto," since the word implies "a full public declaration of intentions, opinions or purposes." Of course, historically the best feminist manifestos emerged from collective consciousness raising and discussion. They were not the voice of one individual. Instead of creating a space of female solidarity, Sandberg exists as the lone queen amid millions of admirers. And no one in her group dares to question how she could be heralded as the "voice of revolutionary feminism."

How feminist, how revolutionary can a powerful rich woman be when she playfully admits that she concedes all money

management and bill paying to her husband? As Sandberg confesses, she would rather not think about money matters when she could be planning little Dora parties for her kids. This anecdote, like many others in the book, works to create the personal image of Sandberg. It is this “just plain folks” image that has been instrumental in her success, for it shows her as vulnerable.

This is not her only strategy. When giving filmed lectures, she wears clothes with sexy deep V-necks and stiletto heels and this image creates the aura of vulnerable femininity. It reminds one of the popular television advertisement from years ago wherein a sexy white woman comes home and dances around singing: “I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan and never let you forget you’re a man . . . cause I’m a w-o-m-a-n!” Sandberg’s constructed image is not your usual sexist misogynist media portrayal of a feminist. She is never depicted as a man-hating ball-busting feminist nag.

Instead, she comes across both in her book and when performing on stages as a lovable younger sister who just wants to play on the big brother’s team. It would be more in keeping with this image to call her brand of women’s liberation *faux feminism*. A billionaire, one of the richest women in the world, Sandberg deflects attention from this reality. To personify it might raise critical questions. It might even have created the conditions for other women to feel threatened by her success. She solves that little problem by never speaking of money in *Lean In*; she uses the word once.

And if that reality does not bring to her persona enough I’M EVERYWOMAN appeal, she tells her audiences: “I truly believe that the single most important career decision that a woman makes is whether she will have a life partner or who that partner is.” Even though most women, straight or gay, have not seen choosing a life partner as a “career decision,” anyone who

See pp. 114–16
for ways to
repeat key
terms and
phrases.

advocates feminist politics knows that the choice of a partner matters. However, Sandberg's convenient use of the word partner masks the reality that she is really speaking about heteronormative partnerships, and even more specifically marriages between white women and white men. She shares: "Contrary to the popular notion that only unmarried women can make it to the top, the majority of the more successful female business leaders have partners." Specifically, though not directly, she is talking about white male husbands. For after telling readers that the most successful women at the top are partnered, she highlights the fact that "of the twenty-eight women who have served as CEO's of Fortune 500 companies, twenty-six were married, one was divorced and only one was never married." Again, no advocates of feminism would disagree with the notion that individual women should choose partners wisely. Good partners as defined by old style women's liberation movement and reiterated by Sandberg (who makes it seem that this is a new insight) are those who embrace equality, who care and share. One of the few radical arguments in *Lean In* is that men should come to the table—"the kitchen table." This is rarely one of the points Sandberg highlights in her media performances.

Of course, the vast majority of men in our society, irrespective of race, embrace patriarchal values; they do not embrace a vision or practice of gender equality either at work or in the domestic household. Anyone who acts as though women just need to make right choices is refusing to acknowledge the reality that men must also be making the right choice. Before females even reach the stage of life where choosing partners is important, we should all be developing financial literacy, preparing ourselves to manage our money well, so that we need not rely on finding a sharing partner who will manage our finances fairly.

According to *More Magazine*, American women are expected to control 23 trillion dollars by the end of the decade, which is “nearly twice the current amount.” But what will this control mean if women lack financial literacy? Acquiring money and managing money are not the same actions. Women need to confront the meaning and uses of money on all levels. This is knowledge Sandberg the Chief Operating Officer possesses even if she coyly pretends otherwise.

In her 2008 book *The Comeback*, Emma Gilbey Keller exam- 20
ines many of the issues Sandberg addresses. Significantly, and unlike Sandberg, she highlights the need for women to take action on behalf of their financial futures. One chapter in the book begins with the epigram: “A woman’s best production is a little money of her own.” Given the huge amounts of money Sandberg has acquired, ostensibly by paying close attention to her financial future, her silence on the subject of money in *Lean In* undermines the call for genuine equality. Without the ability to be autonomous, in control of self and finances, women will not have the strength and confidence to “lean in.”

Mass media (along with Sandberg) is telling us that by sheer strength of will and staying power, any woman so inclined can work hard and climb the corporate ladder all the way to the top. Shrewdly, Sandberg acknowledges that not all women desire to rise to the top, asserting that she is not judging women who make different choices. However, the real truth is that she is making judgments about the nature of women and work—that is what the book is fundamentally about. Her failure to confront the issue of women acquiring wealth allows her to ignore concrete systemic obstacles most women face inside the workforce. And by not confronting the issue of women and wealth, she need not confront the issue of women and poverty. She need not address the ways extreme class differences make it difficult

for there to be a common sisterhood based on shared struggle and solidarity.

The contemporary feminist movement has not concentrated meaningful attention on the issue of women and wealth. Rightly, however, the movement highlighted the need for gender equity in the workforce—equal pay for equal work. This economic focus exposed the reality that race was a serious factor over-determining women's relationship to work and money. Much feminist thought by individual visionary women of color (especially black women thinkers) and white female allies called for a more accurate representation of female identity, one that would consider the reality of intersectionality. This theory encouraged women to see race and class as well as gender as crucial factors shaping female destiny. Promoting a broader insight, this work lay the groundwork for the formation of genuine female solidarity—a solidarity based on awareness of difference as well as the all-too-common gendered experiences women share. It has taken many years of hard work to create basic understandings of female identity; it will take many more years for solidarity between women to become reality.

It should surprise no one that women and men who advocate feminist politics were stunned to hear Sandberg promoting her trickle-down theory: the assumption that having more women at the top of corporate hierarchies would make the work world better for all women, including women on the bottom. Taken at face value, this seem a naive hope given that the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal corporate world Sandberg wants women to lean into encourages competition over cooperation. Or as Kate Losse, author of *Boy Kings: A Journey into the Heart of the Social Network*, which is an insider look at the real gender politics of Facebook, contends: "By arguing that women should express their feminism by remaining