

THE LEAN IN MOMENT

Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* is one call, sounded from the echelons of corporate business, for women to make something of the world.

As COO of Facebook, Sandberg is a Harvard MBA graduate with \$1.3 billion in net worth. That means she is a world away from most women I know—most people I know. Yet her vision of a “truly equal world . . . where women ran half our countries and companies and men ran half our homes” is an attempt to address one problem: that all image bearers are made to reign over institutional culture, yet from the looks of things, only men do. Sandberg understands that “most leadership positions are held by men, so women don't expect to achieve them.” She rightly underscores that “you can't be what you can't see,” to quote educator Marian Wright Edelman. Meaning that we need more women in senior leadership so that other, aspiring women know that they can do and be the same.

Sandberg notes many external barriers working women face, including negative perceptions of strong women. “The likeability factor” is a tightrope on which women who are direct and decisive are seen as “difficult” or “aggressive,” while women who are nice are seen as great administrators but not great leaders. Err on one side of how you self-present, and you fall off of the thin tightrope to becoming a respected leader.

Another reason the number of women leaders remains low in many workplaces is because of bad policies. The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that doesn't have a federal paid maternity-leave policy.

Let me repeat this, because it's positively nutty: The richest and most powerful nation ever, in the whole world, ever, does not have a federal paid maternity-leave policy.

And because of such gaps in workplace policies, many talented women "leave before they leave." "From an early age, girls get the message that they will have to choose between succeeding at work and being a good mother," writes Sandberg. Thus, many women make many small decisions over time about children—sometimes long before they are close to having them—that slowly edge them out of leadership.¹ "The pipeline that supplies the educated workforce is chock-full of women at the entry level, but by the time that same pipeline is filling leadership positions, it is overwhelmingly stocked by men," Sandberg observes. She notes that, of Yale alumni who had reached age 40 by the year 2000, 90 percent of the men were working, compared with just 56 percent of the women.

Notably, Sandberg praises stay-at-home parents and acknowledges that many women "welcome the opportunity to get out of the rat race." She simply encourages women who love their work that they don't have to abandon it even while they love their children. Careful readers will find a pro-family message that

urges more husbands and fathers to invest deeply in their homes and children, even as they work outside the home.

In fact, many Christian women are primed to receive the message of *Lean In*—especially if they have leadership skills that don't fit comfortably within Christian subcultures.

“The night I began reading [*Lean In*], I found myself feverishly earmarking and underlining,” wrote Rebekah Lyons, co-founder of Q Ideas, a conference and web forum for Christian leaders.² “Sure, I am the COO of exactly nada,” wrote Lesa Engelthaler, senior associate at a Dallas recruiting firm. “And yet I felt a kinship with Sandberg from the first chapter as she described herself as a girl being called ‘bossy’ and knowing, even as a young child, that it was not a compliment.” Katherine Leary Alsdorf is founder of the Center for Faith and Work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC. “I thought [Sandberg] was very courageous,” Alsdorf told me at the 2014 Gospel Coalition women’s conference. “I thought, *Lord, if you’re working here, I can find all these places where, unbeknownst to her, she’s saying something that has theological resonance.*” Alsdorf noted that, like another landmark book—Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*—Sandberg rightly laments the ways many companies lose out when women aren’t leading.

But there’s at least one glaring omission in *Lean In*. And it’s one that Christians are uniquely called to fill—if we have a right understanding of work.

² “Bravery vs. Ambition: Leaning Out, Not In,” Rebekah Lyons. Qideas.org, April 5, 2013.

THE WHY BEHIND THE WORK

When people have learned I'm writing this book, one common response has been, "Oh, like *Lean In* by what's her name, Sharon Sanders?" (Okay, only one person said this.) The comparison is humbling. But in the process of writing this book, I have bristled at the comparison. Why? Because Sandberg names the *how* of work—how to advocate for yourself and lead meetings and navigate a company's maternity leave policies—but only takes us to the far edge of the *why* of work. At the center of her sage advice, and of the broader "superstar" messaging directed at women today, is a big gaping hole where the *purpose* of work should be.

I was abruptly awakened to the weakness of *Lean In* while leading a conversation at a Presbyterian church in Seattle. To a group of about 10 women, I explained the book project by mentioning *Lean In* as evidence that the topic of women's work was alive and well. One of the women scoffed.

"This whole conversation about getting the corner office—I have no interest in that," she said. "The women I work with are not thinking about any of this."

The woman told us that she counseled immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of whom had suffered abuse and violence before coming to the United States. Now she was advocating for undocumented workers in Tacoma, Washington. For her and the women she worked with, Sandberg's manifesto seemed focused on getting the already elite members of society into even higher

echelons of personal fulfillment. She rightly pointed out the way *privilege* intersects with our approach to work, as if our own advancement is always the highest goal.

And in reality, that's how most of mainstream culture—not just high-level corporate culture—thinks and talks about work.

Sandberg implies that if any of us follows her advice, we can enjoy as much success as she has. But she never acknowledges that to advocate for a raise or to “speak up” in meetings is privileged, for it assumes the protections of white-collar culture. It goes without saying the choice to hire a nanny or a chef is available to very few people. The option of marrying a supportive man—a high-achieving powerhouse in his own right, yet one who will split childcare duties in half—is available to few people. Even to write a book (cough) is a choice that arises from privilege.

Beyond questions of privilege, most of us have inherited a flawed view of why we work at all. According to the mainstream American narrative, work is about what it can give *you*, rather than what you can give it. And what it seemingly can give you is security—in the form of ever-growing paychecks and an ample retirement nest egg; or affirmation—in the form of outranking colleagues or growing your Twitter following; or power—in the form of shaping a corporate culture and having others know how important you are. To be sure, security, affirmation, and power are not inherently bad. But they become bad—that is, idols

—when we try to wrest them from something other than God, who perfectly provides us all three.

And this is ultimately why Sandberg's *Lean In* scratches a real felt need among many Christian women, but really only scratches the surface. In her dream to see workplaces where 50 percent of all leadership positions are held by women, Sandberg takes the dominant ways *men* treat work and simply baptizes them in pink. She doesn't question the underlying values of the modern workplace—in large part because she has enjoyed to some degree the wealth and status that come with mastering it. Instead of questioning the world that privileged men in the West have created, women are simply learning to acclimate to it.

In response to this, some Christians will discourage women from pursuing *any* professional success. *You should be content with what you have*, they will say. *What makes you think God wants you to "have it all" anyway?*

But the Christian response to all this—to the blind spots of *Lean In* and to the broader conversation that it represents—is not to discourage women from pursuing work. It's not to imbue the homestead and motherhood with a holy, saccharine aura that hardly reflects the difficult and at times downright boring aspects of either. The response is not to push all Christians to write off the workplace to become pastors or missionaries.

The Christian response is to recover the holy, human, world-altering and self-giving purposes of work itself.

