

Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders

Part 1

So for any of us in this room today, let's start out by admitting we're lucky. We don't live in the world our mothers lived in, our grandmothers lived in, where career choices for women were so limited. And if you're in this room today, most of us grew up in a world where we had basic civil rights, and amazingly, we still live in a world where some women don't have them. But **all that aside**¹, we still have a problem, and it's a real problem. And the problem is this: Women are not making it to the top of any profession anywhere in the world. The numbers tell the story quite clearly. 190 heads of state—nine are women. Of all the people in parliament in the world, 13 percent are women. In the corporate sector, women at the top, **C-level jobs**², board seats—tops out at 15, 16 percent. The numbers have not moved since 2002 and are going in the wrong direction. And even in the non-profit world, a world we sometimes think of as being led by more women, women at the top: 20 percent.

We also have another problem, which is that women face harder choices between professional success and personal fulfillment. A recent study in the U.S. showed that, of married senior managers, two-thirds of the married men had children and only one-third of the married women had children.

[. . .] So the question is, how are we going to fix this? How do we change these numbers at the top? How do we make this different? I want to start out by saying, I talk about this—about keeping women in the workforce—because I really think that's the answer. In the high-income part of our

workforce, in the people who end up at the top—**Fortune 500**³ CEO jobs, or the equivalent in other industries—the problem, I am convinced, is that women are dropping out. Now people talk about this a lot, and they talk about things like **flextime**⁴ and mentoring and programs companies should have to train women. I want to talk about none of that today, even though that's all really important. Today, I want to focus on what we can do as individuals. What are the messages we need to tell ourselves? What are the messages we tell the women who work with and for us? What are the messages we tell our daughters?

Now, at the outset, I want to be very clear that this speech comes with no judgments. I don't have the right answer. I don't even have it for myself. I left San Francisco, where I live, on Monday, and I was getting on the plane for this conference. And my daughter, who's three, when I dropped her off at preschool, did that whole hugging-the-leg, crying, "Mommy, don't get on the plane" thing. This is hard. I feel guilty sometimes. I know no women, whether they're at home or whether they're in the workforce, who don't feel that sometimes. So I'm not saying that staying in the workforce is the right thing for everyone.

My talk today is about what the messages are if you do want to stay in the workforce, and I think there are three. One, sit at the table. Two, make your **partner**⁵ a real partner. And three, don't leave before you leave.

[. . .]

¹ The expression "all that aside" is used to say that what was previously said is not relevant for what will be said next.

² "C-level jobs" refers to those at the head of companies: CEO, CFO, COO, etc. The "C" stands for "Chief."

³ "Fortune 500" refers to a list of the top 500 companies in the world published yearly by Fortune magazine.

⁴ "Flexitime" is a system of flexible work hours that some companies offer.

⁵ Note that the term "partner" is used by Sandberg here to refer to marriage partner or life partner, not business partner.

Part 2

[W]omen systematically underestimate their own abilities. If you test men and women, and you ask them questions on totally objective criteria like **GPAs**⁶, men get it wrong slightly high, and women get it wrong slightly low. Women do not negotiate for themselves in the workforce. A study in the last two years of people entering the workforce out of college showed that 57 percent of boys entering, or men, I guess, are negotiating their first salary, and only seven percent of women. And most importantly, men attribute their success to themselves, and women attribute it to other external factors. If you ask men why they did a good job, they'll say, "I'm awesome. Obviously. Why are you even asking?" If you ask women why they did a good job, what they'll say is someone helped them, they got lucky, they worked really hard. Why does this matter? Boy, it matters a lot because no one gets to **the corner office**⁷ by sitting on the side, not at the table, and no one gets the promotion if they don't think they deserve their success, or they don't even understand their own success.

I wish the answer were easy. I wish I could just go tell all the young women I work for, all these fabulous women, "Believe in yourself and negotiate for yourself. **Own your own success**⁸." I wish I could tell that to my daughter. But it's not that simple. Because what the data shows, above all else, is one thing, which is that success and likeability are positively correlated for men and negatively correlated for women. And everyone's nodding, because we all know this to be true.

There's a really good study that shows this really well. There's a famous Harvard Business School study on a woman named Heidi Roizen. And she's an operator in a company in **Silicon Valley**⁹, and she uses her contacts to become a very successful **venture capitalist**¹⁰. In 2002—not so long ago—a professor who was then at Columbia University took that case and made it [Howard] Roizen. And he gave the case out, both of them, to two groups of students. He changed exactly one word: *Heidi* to *Howard*. But that one word made a really big difference. He then surveyed the students, and the good news was the students, both men and women, thought Heidi and Howard were equally competent, and that's good. The bad news was that everyone liked Howard. He's a great guy. You want to work for him. You want to spend the day fishing with him. But Heidi? Not so sure. She's a little **out for herself**¹¹. She's a little political. You're not sure you'd want to work for her. This is the complication. We have to tell our daughters and our colleagues, we have to tell ourselves to believe we got the A, to reach for the promotion, to sit at the table, and we have to do it in a world where, for them, there are sacrifices they will make for that, even though for their brothers, there are not.

The saddest thing about all of this is that it's really hard to remember this. And I'm about to tell a story which is truly embarrassing for me, but I think important. I gave this talk at Facebook not so long ago to about 100 employees, and a couple hours later, there was a young woman who works there sitting outside my little desk, and she wanted to talk to

⁶ "GPA" refers to grade-point average, a score that measures overall educational success in school based on the average grades received in all classes.

⁷ The expression "the corner office" refers to a position of success. Traditionally, the head of a company usually has the large corner office with a view.

⁸ When you "own something" that you did, it means you take accountability for it and say you are responsible.

⁹ Silicon Valley is an area in California where many major technology companies have their offices.

¹⁰ A "venture capitalist" invests in companies, often new ones.

¹¹ Someone who is "out for themselves" is selfishly motivated.

me. I said, OK, and she sat down, and we talked. And she said, “I learned something today. I learned that I need to keep my hand up.” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “Well, you’re giving this talk, and you said you were going to take two more questions. And I had my hand up with lots of other people, and you took two more questions. And I put my hand down, and I noticed all the women put their hand down, and then you took more questions, only from the men.” And I thought to myself, wow, if it’s me—who cares about this, obviously—giving this talk—and during this talk, I can’t even notice that the men’s hands are still raised, and the women’s hands are still raised, how good are we as managers of our companies and our organizations at seeing that the men are reaching for opportunities more than women? We’ve got to get women to sit at the table.

[. . .] My generation really, sadly, is not going to change the numbers at the top. They’re just not moving. We are not going to get to where 50 percent of the population—in my generation, there will not be 50 percent of [women] at the top of any industry. But I’m hopeful that future generations can. I think a world that was run where half of our countries and half of our companies were run by women, would be a better world. And it’s not just because people would know where the women’s bathrooms are, even though that would be very helpful. I think it would be a better world. I have two children. I have a five-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. I want my son to have a choice to contribute fully in the workforce or at home, and I want my daughter to have the choice to not just succeed, but to be liked for her accomplishments.

This is an edited version of Sandberg’s 2010 TED Talk. To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.