**http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/mar/13/lean-in-sheryl-sandberg-review**

**Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead by Sheryl Sandberg – review**

Zoe Williams challenges an infantilising, reactionary guide for ambitious women



‘A woman needs to combine niceness with insistence’ … Sheryl Sandberg. Photograph: Pascal Lauener/Reuters

In 2010, Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, gave [a TED talk about women in the boardroom](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18uDutylDa4). They were too small in number because they faltered on the way there, and they faltered because they "took their foot off the gas". I say "they" rather than "we"; one of the conclusions I draw from *Lean In*, the book that resulted from this talk, is that the women whom Sandberg addresses, the ones who are missing from their rightful place in the boardroom, are quite a distinct group, not interchangeable with "all women" and certainly not synonymous with "feminists", but we'll come to that shortly. The talk was an immediate hit, generated reams of comment internationally and has now had more than 2 million views on YouTube. It was only natural that it should become a book, but it's only in the elongation, I realise, that I fully understand what she meant.

I took it for a motivational speech, thinking that by "gas", she meant "female power" and by "taking one's foot off", she meant women were frightened of their own power – I took her for a sort of Nelson Mandela for girls, "our deepest fear is that we are awesome beyond measure". In fact, Sandberg's message is subtly different – we hold ourselves back because of a raft of factors: social expectation, a lack of domestic assertiveness, a sense that, from the minute we reach maturity, we are forward-planning for our own subservience. She specialises in very tough messages to women: "I turned to look at the audience," she writes, of a speech she gave at Harvard Business School in 2011, "paused, and answered with brutal honesty. 'If current trends continue, 15 years from today, about one-third of the women in this audience will be working full-time and almost all of you will be working for the guy you are sitting next to.'"

At the same time, her approach to the issue as a whole is emollient, carefully inoffensive; she is always first to jump in with what she isn't saying, always first to articulate what might be a criticism against her. "I know that some believe that by focusing on what women can do to change themselves – pressing them to lean in – it seems like I am letting our institutions off the hook. Or even worse, they accuse me of blaming the victim." An interesting segue, here: she identifies the opposite point of view in a way that neutralises it, making her opponents seem superstitious, with their "beliefs" and afraid of change, with their "institutions". Immediately afterwards, she appears wounded by their hocus pocus – "even worse" – and uses language more typically associated, in terms of gender, with sexual assault than with glass ceilings. She appears to be saying "we may have different approaches, yours is a bit more primitive, but we can all cohabit this space" and then immediately ups the ante – "you think you're serious about female empowerment at work? Nobody's more serious than I am." Not for the last time, I'm impressed by the subtlety, but it's a negotiator's manoeuvre, not an intellectual progression. The aim is not to find a new truth; the aim is "gotcha".

Sandberg peppers her exhortations with relevant experiences of her own; describing the "damned if you do, doomed if you don't" bind that women are in when they advocate in their own interests or boast about their achievements (if they do either, they are perceived as not being nice; if they don't, they won't get what they want). The author recalls having "most likely to succeed" taken off her yearbook because she didn't want to damage her chances of getting a date for the prom. She won a Henry Ford scholarship for her attainments in her first year at business school, jointly with six men, and didn't tell anybody. "I never really considered going public. I instinctively knew that letting my academic performance become known was a bad idea … Being at the top of the class may have made life easier for my male peers, but it would have made my life harder." Most astonishing of all, she married at 24, having imbibed from her parents the message that "the most eligible women marry young to get a 'good man' before they are all taken". For a woman born in the late 60s, she seems to have had few – remarkably few – brushes with any feminist ideas. The way she describes her life betrays no concept of emancipation, be it social or sexual. It is, frankly, bizarre. If I read it blind and with all the [internet](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/internet) startups removed, I would think she had been raised in quite a conservative household in the 30s or 40s. It could be a North American thing – the country is not famous for its evolved attitudes to gender. It is one of only four countries in the world to have no mandated paid maternity leave (the others are Liberia, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland). But even taking that into account, feminists of any nationality will find it hard to stomach being told what a "revolution" should look like, by a woman without the spine to admit she was clever in the 1980s.

But that is exactly the point: this book isn't offering a new spark for a feminist revolution. Rather, it says, your revolution has stalled – why don't you try getting what you want my way? Perhaps predictably, this involves a lot of flexibility, and even more smiling. "A woman needs to combine niceness with insistence," she concludes, having surveyed all the evidence that people respond badly to women who lobby in their own interests. "I understand the paradox of advising women to change the world by adhering to its biased rules and expectations. I know it is not a perfect answer but a means to a desirable end." We're back at the prom. Zip it, smart-arse, or you won't get laid. Except you probably wouldn't want to get laid, because it would erode your value proposition.

This goal-driven, ideology-free approach has some fascinating insights into the world of business itself. Where Sandberg describes the thought processes that led her to Google (fast-growing companies always have more work than they have people; slow-growing companies have more senior people than they have interesting work, so senior people concentrate instead on eating each other – it's obvious once somebody says it), or the interview process that led her to Facebook (dinner with Mark Zuckerberg, every night, for weeks), it's magnetic. But when she pans back to apply her approach to all women, her conclusions are often comically infantilising. She gives Arianna Huffington as an ego ideal. "Her advice is that we should let ourselves react emotionally and feel whatever anger or sadness being criticised evokes for us. And then we should quickly move on. She points to children as her role model. A child can cry one moment and run off to play the next." Sure. And a cat can go to sleep when it's bored. Emulating the cat may not be the best way to deal with a boring situation. Later, a superior intervenes on her behalf with a client who keeps trying to fix her up with his son, and she remarks: "I could not have been more grateful for Robert's protection. I knew exactly how that baby bird felt when he finally found his mother."

This is not a book about how women can become more equal: this is a book about how women can become more like Sheryl Sandberg. You will be able to decide relatively fast how plausible a goal this is.