

The future of feminism

Paul Seabright

Alison Wolf

THE XX FACTOR

How working women are creating a new society

464pp. Profile Books. Paperback, £15.99.

978 1 84668 403 6

Sheryl Sandberg

LEAN IN

Women, work and the will to lead

240pp. W. H. Allen. £14.99.

978 0 75354 162 3

Published: 26 June 2013



Businesswoman climbing a ladder Photograph: Walter Hodges/© Walter Hodges/Corbis

At a time when gay marriage is eliciting widely divergent views about the nature and importance of the institution of marriage in general, it is as well to be reminded, as we are by Alison Wolf at the beginning of *The XX Factor*, that for most women in the developed world, whether or not they marry is less important now for their personal fulfilment than it has ever been in recorded history. For Jane Austen, refusing a proposal of marriage was an utterly life-changing event, something that could not have been said of any of the men in her society. In some parts of the world today, refusing a proposal is still impossible, however calamitous a young woman fears its consequences will be. But in Europe and North America in the twenty-first century, choosing a marriage partner has for many women become a lifestyle choice with fewer long-term consequences than choosing a school or a job.

Alison Wolf's twist on this turn of events, though, is to argue that it means very different things to the most educated 20 per cent of women than to the 80 per cent of their less educated sisters. These women, she writes, "have become a class apart . . . they are more like the men of the family than ever before in history. It is from other women that they have drawn away". Her book is a clear, well-written and extensively documented account of the lives of educated women with professional jobs in the early twenty-first century (she says little about the other 80 per cent, except for the purposes of contrast). Though she rarely makes the judgement explicit, it is

clear that she feels feminism has little more to offer such women. There is no real discrimination left to speak of, for women who have advanced education and the determination to pursue a professional career. How they interleave marriage and work will be up to them. This won't mean that they live exactly like men – but any remaining differences will be ones that are freely chosen. "Today", she writes, "clever girls can be lawyers, entrepreneurs or army captains; run a cable channel or a government department." This is a no-nonsense, upbeat, busy book written for and about no-nonsense upbeat, busy women by one of their own.

Wolf's book has received nothing like the media attention given to *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief

Operating Officer of Facebook, though I suspect Wolf's book will be read for longer than Sandberg's. *Lean In*, which argues that the main remaining obstacles to the advancement of professional women come from their own inhibitions, has become a best-seller in America, but it has also attracted a large amount of criticism alternately hostile and patronizing. Many critics have been outraged at what they see as her blindness to remaining discrimination, and have sneered at the idea that someone with so much money to pay for teams of nannies could possibly have anything to say to other working women. Sandberg's semi-confessional accounts of the conflicting pressures under which she has laboured have been mocked as though they were intellectual inconsistencies. Anne Applebaum in the *New York Review of Books* dismissed this book as "the first truly successful, best-selling 'how to succeed in business' motivational book to be explicitly designed and marketed for women", with no serious claim to say anything worth reading about gender and modern society.

This is both unfair and understandable, since Sandberg's is a crossover book, and anyone irritated by the motivational style and often cloying personal anecdotes will have difficulty paying her more serious arguments the attention they deserve. It's hard to imagine a similar book written by a man attracting either this much publicity or quite this kind of scorn. Yet for all their differences of style, Sandberg's and Wolf's books make a similar, and entirely serious claim: with the right amount and kind of education, feminism becomes unnecessary. In different ways both also illustrate, mostly inadvertently, how even in the twenty-first century women's life choices continue to be made under a far greater glare of reproofing scrutiny than those of similarly talented men.

Less confessional than *Lean In*, *The XX Factor* blends anecdote and statistics in a highly readable and informative way. We learn that, contrary to widely shared beliefs about the "second shift" that leads women overall to do a higher total of paid and unpaid work than men, across the developed world "men and women now put in the same average number of working hours". Furthermore, "it is the graduate professionals, the ones with the longest average hours of employment, who record spending the most time with their children. It is true for men and for women. And the gap between them and other families is widening". We learn about the different ways educated and less educated women pay for childcare. We learn about marriage markets and markets for sexual services and the sex lives of single college women. "Among [American women aged twenty-five to forty-four] who went on to gain a higher degree, more than half reported that they were over nineteen when they first had intercourse. Among high school dropouts, by contrast, half reported having had intercourse before their sixteenth birthday." While many of these facts are well known to researchers, they have rarely been marshalled together so effectively in a format that, like the kind of parties these A-list women apparently attend, manages to be fun while staying entirely sober.

There is a weakness, though, in this method of statistical reporting, which is that the reader is continually tempted to jump from statistical correlations to causal conclusions, often with a nod and a wink from Wolf herself. When you learn that successful women tend to do X or to be Y, it's hard not to think that doing X or being Y are somehow ingredients in the recipe that creates their success, rather than being purely the attendant consequences of that success. Take the issues of adolescent female sexuality, the subject of a chapter here and an article by Wolf in the *Spectator* in April. She wrote in that article: "One group of girls is setting off along an alpha track, leaving their contemporaries behind; and teenage sex lives are a very good predictor of who they are". The take-home message is clear: hold on to your virginity at least till after you leave school. In the twenty-first century, you may no longer owe it to your religion or your future husband to be sexually responsible, but you certainly owe it to your career.

Nothing in the correlation justifies such a conclusion. More successful women may be sexually choosier than others, and they will be naturally choosier, without having to be bossed into it by disapproving authority figures. But they will also have better opportunities to choose from; and the combined effect might be to make them either more or less sexually active than their less successful peers. Overall, the statistics clearly suggest that the first effect dominates the second: more academically successful girls begin

sexual activity at a later age, on average. But there is, as there should be, much variation around that average, reflecting different opportunities. A woman who concludes that being sexually choosier than she naturally wants to be will improve her chances of making the alpha track is making the same statistical error as a man who thinks that drinking more dry martinis will make him richer. Yet for some reason contemporary right thinking, here echoed by Wolf, still entitles young men to experiment sexually, have a few disappointing encounters mixed in with some delightful ones, and mark it all down to valuable life experience, while young women who do the same are considered morally incontinent or at best rather sad in a Bridget Jones-y sort of way. The image of women as somehow soiled by their diverse experiences while men are challenged and potentially enriched by them proves very hard to shake off. Other women are as quick as men to leap to judgement.

Wolf is also prone to write as though a single statistic settles an argument, when it may just be a new twist in a continually developing story. “Today, *like for like*”, she writes (her emphasis), “women and men are paid and treated more or less equally in the workplaces of the developed world.” While there is something to this claim (which captures an important advance over earlier decades), her remark still misses an important point. Like for like, the poor and the rich are treated more or less equally in the US health insurance market, but that doesn’t stop the price paid for health insurance by the poor, who are more likely to be sick, from being a matter of public concern.

Professional women are still much more likely than men to take career breaks, and to work shorter hours than average. That’s neither surprising, nor necessarily disturbing if it reflects authentic preferences. What’s disturbing is the price they pay if they do – women who leave the labour market for a year or two to look after children are substantially disadvantaged, not just on their return, but two or three decades later. Just 4.2 per cent of the CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies are women, and the remuneration of top executive women falls below that of similarly qualified men by an amount that is hard to estimate but is probably at least 20 per cent, and may be much more when indirect benefits such as stock options are taken into account. There is really no evidence at all that this price reflects any difference in talent or motivation. Instead, it seems likely that the talents women exercise outside the workplace remain invisible to their employers, who for the most part show little concern to discover them. The best thing Steve Jobs did for his career at Apple was to leave the company, returning some time later with new ideas. Most women would be ill advised to try to follow his example.

This isn’t really a matter of justice, at least not at the top end. Compared to the global scandal of the millions of girls who suffer female circumcision, are prevented from going to school, are beaten or economically cheated when they reach adulthood, the sufferings of prosperous professional women who earn somewhat less than equally talented professional men should not keep anyone but themselves awake at night. Instead, it’s about the distribution of economic power in our advanced societies. If fewer than a twentieth of Fortune 500 companies have shown themselves capable of searching for a CEO in the female half of the talent pool, what confidence can we have that they are doing the rest of their job well? When a man who has never seriously considered working for a woman CEO tells you that his multimillion dollar bonus was the price necessary to secure the best available talent in the market place, your bullshit-o-meter should go haywire.

There’s ample evidence that the bonus culture at the very top of large corporations is the outcome of a status-signalling game played largely among men, whose rules are quickly learned by the few women admitted to play among them. This game is itself embedded in a larger signalling game, in which the rules for being considered a serious contributor to the teamwork of professional life remain more appropriate to the corporations of the 1950s than to the flexible, cyber-connected work environments of today. These signalling games happen to be ones that women are often uneasy about playing, for reasons that nobody completely understands but that prove surprisingly resistant both to exhortation and to policy-making. They are also very costly to men, notably in impoverishing their opportunities for interacting with their

families. Sheryl Sandberg has a particular take on these games: “in addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in”.

Sheryl Sandberg’s book is fluent, mostly well researched, and often very amusing, usually intentionally so. It is also thoughtful, undogmatic and sensitive, so that I found myself continually formulating objections to her arguments only to find them addressed a few pages later. Blaming her for blaming women for their lack of representation in positions of economic and political power (as many reviewers have) is to miss the point. It is entirely legitimate to ask whether women can improve their representation by changing their own behaviour as well as by calling for change on the part of men, and Sandberg asks the question fairly and evenly, without apportioning blame. A version of that question was asked a decade or so ago by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, and it is a pity that their excellent and pioneering book *Women Don’t Ask* is buried in Sandberg’s footnotes rather than given the credit it deserves. Sandberg’s acknowledgements also mention a “writing partner”, Nell Scovell, who, if she did what I think we should infer she did, ought really to have her name on the cover of this book alongside Sandberg’s. Sandberg’s self-focused but team-supported approach to child-care evidently extends to her writing as well.

There is a disconcerting side to Sandberg, too, and it is not just the lack of irony in her call for women to display “relentless niceness”, or her chirpily recounting how uplifting it is to be surrounded by moralizing maxims in the Facebook offices. (“At Facebook, we work hard to create a culture where people are encouraged to take risks. We have posters all round the office that reinforce this attitude. In bright red letters, one declares ‘Fortune favors the bold.’”) Aside from a single sentence in the introduction that reads as though inserted by her publicist, Sandberg’s book displays a blissful inability to conceive that thoughtful women, or indeed thoughtful men, might really have other ambitions and values than to exercise leadership in the kind of corporate environment Sandberg has made her own, unless it is to invest quality time in the raising of children who might exercise such leadership a generation later. In her book women who do not rush forward to claim leadership positions are simply failing to be true to what they all secretly want. That’s doubtless true of some of them, and her encouraging these ones to “lean in” is admirable, but it must also be true that quite a few of the women she comes across have other ideals than to model themselves on her.

Sheryl Sandberg seems curiously unable to think of activity as valuable unless it contributes to your own résumé or to that of your children. Women, or men, who write unpublished poetry or make gardens or explore the natural world or learn a musical instrument to less than top professional standard or travel adventurously or discover and help others discover the beauties of literature just don’t appear to cut it in her world. I don’t say she disapproves of them; I doubt she thinks very much about them at all. This is odd at first sight: after all, hundreds of millions of individuals have confided their private dreams and aspirations to her company Facebook, and she should know what makes her clients tick.

But it may not be so odd after all. Facebook pages have become in some people’s minds a kind of substitute résumé of their leisure time for those whose professional résumés are unexceptional. Facebook has given a new, corporate spin to the old and fluent human ideals of friendship, turning into a multi-billion dollar business model the notion that what you tell one of your friends is what you want to tell them all. The dreams you confide to Facebook are not really your subversive and unsettling private dreams at all, but that packaged and standardized version of them that you are willing to present to the group of your “friends”. Mistaking the latter for the former would be to foster a bland and enveloping sameness of aspiration by which women will continue to be far more suffocated than men.

The XX Factor shares some of this relentless focus, though Alison Wolf has an altogether defter touch than Sheryl Sandberg. The idea that education might also contribute to enabling you to find more fulfilment in your leisure time doesn’t appear in Wolf’s discussion at all, eloquent though her book is about the consequences of education for women’s professional lives. This should make us wonder about Wolf’s

optimism that education can be relied on in the end to make feminism unnecessary. There are many kinds of education, and the kind that turns you into a confident, take-no-prisoners twenty-first-century professional woman in Western Europe or North America, never off the BlackBerry, is neither the kind on offer in all countries in the world, nor necessarily the kind that all women, or all men, would want if they had more of a say in designing curricula.

The fact that women make up a clear majority of students in higher education in Iran has not yet freed them from having their lives run by bigoted old men. And the fact that women in Western Europe and North America also make up a clear majority of students in higher education has not yet reconciled all of them to the idea that helping to run corporations and similar organizations, even those led by relentlessly nice people like Sheryl Sandberg and Alison Wolf, represents the summit of human fulfilment in the twenty-first century. After all, when all women have the same level of education and the same professional aspirations, not everyone will be able to be a leader. Until we have developed notions of education that enable women and men to cultivate their own ambitions rather than just to enable them to satisfy the ambitions other people think they should have, it is premature to hope that education has rendered feminism redundant. But it's not naive to hope even now that the value of leadership can be judged at least as much by its impact on the fulfilment of the whole of society rather than principally, as it is even in these two stimulating books, by its impact on the fulfilment of the leaders themselves.

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