Lean in or lean out: is either position optimal?

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The debate on women “leaning in” at work which started in 2013 continues into this year, sparking, ebbing and flowing with even more controversial views appearing to support or reject Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer’s 2013 manifesto for working women. How did the debate start and where is it now, and will leaning either way be the solution for us women in the Middle East?

In a 2010 TED talk, Sandberg first laid out her “lean in” message which she followed up with a commencement address to the Barnard class of 2011. Both went viral and seemingly prompted her to write the book, “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead”, in which she shares her personal stories, uses research to shed light on gender differences, and offers practical advice to help women achieve their goals. She challenges women to change the conversation from what they can’t do to what they can. She proposes that regardless of the many gender biases in the workplace, she asks women to believe in themselves, “lean in” and “don’t leave before you leave” — as in don’t doubt your ability to combine work and family or edge yourself out of assignments even before you have children.

But Sandberg did not stop at a book. She launched “Lean In,” a non-profit organization. At the time of writing this article, the leanIn.org website showed 383,372 “women and men” likes.

The programs include “Work Circles” that can be “a monthly roundtable at your house, a regular brown-bag lunch or even a virtual meet-up”. Some say that the “Lean in” phenomenon has resulted in feminism to have been reawakened and even rebranded for the social media generation. But there are those who do not agree fully with Sandberg and I am one of them.

... Regardless of the many gender biases in the workplace, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO asks women to believe in themselves, “lean in” and “don’t leave before you leave”
Anne-Marie Slaughter, a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton, says that this is a young woman’s book. She says that for both the women who “have made it” and the men who work with them, “it is cheaper and more comfortable to believe that what they need to do is simply urge younger women to be more like them, to think differently and negotiate more effectively, rather than make major changes in the way their companies work.” Rosa Brooks, a Schwartz Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation and law professor at the Georgetown University Law Center asks, “Sheryl, have you ever stopped to consider that all this “leaning in” is ruining life for the rest of us?” She cautioned that leaning in at work will mean doing “more work, more often, for longer hours,” and women will disproportionately drop out or be eased out, because they are still expected to work that "second shift" at home. She jokingly proposes a “Manifestus for the Rest of Us” where women and men have the right to “lean out”.

So where does that leave the “Rest of Us” in the Middle East where so much still needs to be done by women and for women to support them to advance?

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I believe we do not have a shortage of women in leadership positions merely due to a lack of ambition and so should not only focus on ways in which women hold themselves back. It is much wider than that. Don’t you think we need governments, boards, businesses, leaders, and men to all lean In as well?

Yes, there are now attempts, and even some successful programs that are getting women in the door and fostering retention and development, but we are still not seeing women advance to leadership positions quickly enough in the region. Inclusion strategies are required to better empower and advance women to top-level positions in both the private and public sectors. In the Middle East, these transformations are just getting started, and there is a lot more to be done, but in all cases, the ingredient for success is not only women leaning in. It is important to involve men in the conversation, and continually challenge long-held assumptions and traditional ways of working in order to accelerate progress. Businesses simply will not be able to be competitive and innovative if they do not take their share of the responsibility.

Rana also participated in an interview about women advancement in the workplace on MTV Lebanon on March 09, 2014.