

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

September 22, 2014

What 'Lean In' Leaves Out

By Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry

Feminism may be the social cause least understood by scholars. Many writers, both scholarly and popular, repeat a whole series of false claims about it: that feminism has been a middle-class white movement; that it has concerned itself exclusively with sex, violence, and reproduction; that it considers men the enemy; that it has become an abstruse, postmodern scholarly discourse; and that it is obsessed with marginal insider controversies (such as that detailed in Michelle Goldberg's recent *New Yorker* piece on transgender people).

Other misconceptions have coalesced around books by Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, and Debora Spar, president of Barnard College. Although their arguments might appear to contrast with each other—Sandberg urges women to "lean in," Spar advises them not to try to do everything—they ultimately rest on the same assumption: Feminist triumph comes with the achievements of individual women, mainly the privileged few.

American feminism over the past hundred years was actually diverse and capacious, both in its constituents and in its issues. It encompassed labor unionists, government policy wonks, professionals, and working-class women, of every race and ethnicity, every religion. They agitated in a multitude of spheres: law, religion, economics, employment, health, birth control, education, athletics, art, and media, to name a few.

It should not be surprising, then, that feminists had varied priorities and strategies. Some worked in all-woman groups, some in organizations with men. (And many feminists were men.) Some focused on public life, others on personal life. Some organized demonstrations; others fought battles in court, wrote articles, went

on strike, or circulated petitions. For some feminists, being a woman was a primary identity; for others, it never was.

There have been many feminisms, and they haven't all agreed. At times, this lack of unity has held back social change, but at other moments the multiplicity of feminisms has been a strength: Diverse movements of women have influenced one another toward a fuller concept of what women's equality and freedom might mean.

Early writers of 20th-century women's history first labeled the period after the adoption of the women's-suffrage amendment in 1920 as "the doldrums." But in fact, the years from 1920 to 1960 featured networks of activists—whom we call "social justice" feminists—focused particularly on working women, mothers, low-income women, and children. Although some suffrage-era women-only organizations continued, the major energy came from women working alongside men, and often struggling to persuade men to listen to women and respond to their needs. African-American and white working-class women were prominent in these campaigns and became the founders of the National Organization for Women. That group, established in 1966, continued the social-justice emphasis on equal employment opportunity, equal pay, and nondiscrimination policies. These feminists not only brought us the 1963 Equal Pay Act but also formed a powerful lobby for the 1964 and 1965 civil-rights laws.

The younger of these social-justice feminists streamed into the progressive movements of the New Left, starting with the civil-rights struggles of the 1950s. One of the earliest and most dramatic civil-rights victories, the Montgomery bus boycott, was sparked by a group of African-American women who had been for years protesting sexual harassment and violence against women. The founders of the women's-liberation movement, when it emerged in the late 1960s, were mainly activists in civil rights, the student movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Moreover, contrary to yet another widespread mistake in discussing this period of history, these young feminists did not "break with" the male-dominated New Left. On the contrary, the great majority continued to work against racism and U.S. imperialism, and became early gay-rights and environmental-protection advocates.

The women's-liberation movement has been difficult to write about because it was so large and so decentralized. These New Left feminists shunned large-scale organizations, fearing their tendencies to become bureaucratic and undemocratic. The result was a head-spinning variety of projects: women's schools, women's centers, women's health and legal clinics, day-care centers; groups advocating welfare rights, labor unions, equal pay, equal job opportunities, working conditions that allowed for parenting, LGBTQ rights, reproductive health, women's athletics, women's-studies programs; and groups fighting rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, sex discrimination, and racism and sexism in the media and in advertising.

Because it was difficult to encompass such diversity, and because New York City produced a host of feminist journalists and the influential *Ms. Magazine*, too many accounts of the women's liberation movement have used New York as if it represented the entire country. Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Durham, Gainesville, Kansas City, San Diego—every town and city had its feminist groups, and each had its own priorities. Similarly, American Indian, Latina, Asian-, and African-American feminists focused on issues that expressed their own priorities.

It is easy to take for granted the changes wrought by earlier feminisms. Since the 1980s, generations of women have grown up in a world in which a base level of gender equality had been achieved, raised to believe they could do anything boys could do, educated by women's-studies programs, and offered opportunities never before available. Women in this period absorbed feminism all around them—in their homes, in their classrooms, in the media, and in the political landscape they entered as adults. For this group, feminism was a way of life, a mind-set, and a set of expectations as much as a political project.

When they first became political actors, primarily in the 1990s, some of these women emphasized their differences with the earlier movement rather than their continuity with it, a characteristic of many young activists: They argued that feminism had become too dogmatic and needed to expand its vision and encompass new goals and new forms of activism. Nevertheless, despite denials, they

were continuing the legacy of earlier activists in the feminist and civil-rights movements in their attention to race as well as gender.

In this younger generation, women of color numbered among the most influential feminist spokeswomen, and worked to dismantle the class and race assumptions that continue to shape dominant narratives about feminism. By the 21st century, their emphasis on generational conflict had declined, and campaigns against political and social inequalities predominated. Meanwhile, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, American feminists became more globally aware, connecting with feminists around the world through blogs and social networks.

When they emerged, many in this new feminist generation conceived of feminism in individualistic terms. Feminism represented greater personal choice—in career opportunities, decisions about motherhood, and forms of expressing their sexuality. They cherished the freedom to create personal lives that differed from those of their mothers or grandmothers. But they soon recognized that individual "empowerment" and personal success, while important, are not enough. Current manifestations of feminism—whether we look at the "[One Billion Rising](#)" global movement to end rape, the feminist blogosphere, or groups fighting for the rights of mothers and other caregivers—continue the emphasis on collective action.

Meanwhile, the pushback against women's gains has been noisy and powerful. Antifeminism has been a fundamental, formative part of ultra-right-wing conservatism since the 1970s. Many Americans are anxious about feminism. Some reject it because they are misinformed by hostile media and moral authorities about what feminism is, others because it threatens choices and options available to them. Those who chose to make motherhood and domesticity their primary work have often felt disrespected by feminism; others, far more numerous, wish they had the option to stay home with their children. Yet few would happily return to the gender structures that prevailed in the 1960s.

Many antifeminists are motivated by fear: fear that women will reject motherhood, that as women become more ambitious, the

whole society will become a masculinist, competitive free-for-all, with no one left to defend the values of nurturance and family solidarity.

In contrast to that caricature, feminism has mostly advocated caregiving and cooperation and argued against competitive individualism. It has asserted the dignity and value of all labor, supported policies designed to reduce inequities and to guarantee health, education, and welfare, and envisioned a society in which all have more leisure time for the pleasures of family, friends, and community.

American feminism always sought to honor women of great achievement, especially in fields that promote a better world, and never only celebrated individualism or individual achievement. Feminism was always a wide and deep river with many currents. And the largest of those currents understood that the fortunes of each are intertwined with the fortunes of all. As with all progressive social movements, solidarity and a sense of responsibility toward others have been fundamental to feminism.

Perhaps even more pernicious than bizarre conservative pronouncements (e.g., you [can't get pregnant](#) from rape) and Fox News obscenities (women who use birth control [are sluts](#)) are the messages that women can gain equality by taking individual control of their lives, becoming more ambitious, or setting better priorities. The Sandberg and Spar books remind us of a common feature of women's magazines: prescriptions for how to organize your closet or your schedule. For most women, the best organization possible still leaves them with overwork, underpay, and under-respect.

Spar's notion that women might want to reduce their commitments is simply inapplicable to the vast majority of American women, who have no choice but to work long hours for wages and then return home to the other jobs: housework and child-raising. Moreover, many women work minimum-wage jobs and have to do several to survive: How are they to simplify their lives and still get by?

Sandberg's notion that women should become more assertive and

bargain for advancement is inapplicable to almost all of us. How will assertive bargaining with an employer help a Walmart clerk, a social worker burdened with an over-large caseload, a schoolteacher with 40 kids in her class, a house cleaner who cleans three houses a day?

Sandberg's website recognizes that assertive women are often branded as shrews or bitches, but the only remedy it offers is to ignore the slurs. Perhaps worst, these books and websites (check out LeanIn.org) reinforce the belief that feminism is a cause of and for privileged women—that successful women got there by "leaning in" while the rest of us have only ourselves to blame.

These misconceptions harm us all. A fuller understanding of American women's movements could not only help women but also lead to more critical thinking about our nation's overall lack of social, political, and economic fairness.

*Dorothy Sue Cobble is a professor of history and labor studies at Rutgers University at New Brunswick. Linda Gordon is a professor of history and the humanities at New York University. Astrid Henry is a professor of women's studies at Grinnell College. Their recent book is *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* (Liveright).*

4 Comments The Chronicle of Higher Education

Login

Sort by Oldest

Share Favorite



Join the discussion...



groland · 7 days ago

I applaud the progress made by feminists in securing voting rights, reproductive freedoms, and legal equality for women. However, as a college student in the late 70s it was apparent to me that the emphasis on women's careers and advancement were somewhat misguided. Feminists sold this as a means to achieve fulfillment and happiness to the point that women were almost ridiculed if they did not push themselves along the power career path.

However, most men have always seen the career or job as a necessary means to get a paycheck, not as a route to happiness or satisfaction. Real fulfillment comes from family and friends. Careers are often sources of stress and disappointment. Men who were successful in negotiating the stresses often had a supportive spouse at home. Obviously, this does not mean women should not compete in the labor force, but rather that this is not necessarily going to generate the kind of personal fulfillment or happiness that the feminist movement promised.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share



mixalot · 7 days ago

I just perused the Meet the Team section of the Lean In site; story after inspiring story of women taking a risky job abroad, leaving a secure position for a temporary consulting gig, getting fired and "falling up." This is a group of accomplished individuals who achieve individual success. Good for them. However, I applaud the authors for challenging us to imagine a minimum wage worker "leaning in" at McDonald's or Walmart. Or 200 Nigerian girls "leaning in" to negotiate with their captors.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share



richard23805 · 5 days ago

I would add to the comments that "work", jobs, and careers can be very fulfilling, creative, intellectually stimulating and can add value to the collective "good" of society. (Less we leave the debate for women with only the oppositional "babies or money" pov- there is a third satisfying answer - doing good work. To pursue such enriching positions is (sadly) all too often a luxury for anyone (regardless of gender). So the "privilege" to lean in is limited to people with the where with all to risk the potential push back. Social Justice for all.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share



aloofbooks · 3 days ago

The fact is that the current feminist movement is at crossroads. It will have to be willing to become more inclusive acknowledge the paramount issues that face women in the 21st century.

^ | v · Reply · Share

Subscribe

Add Disqus to your site

Privacy