

Voices

Five Frustrations

1) **The foundation is flawed.** I am frustrated, first and foremost, by the deep structural problems that persist in this country and act as detriments both to women's achievement of full equality, and to men who desire more options. We pale in comparison to other industrialized nations when it comes to providing both affordable and high-quality child care; "flextime" remains for most more a convenient ideal than a reality; working remotely is often far more difficult than it sounds; and part-time jobs that offer real benefits and can sustain a family are few and far between, even with two wage-earners in a household. It's lovely to think about the kinds of women that have schedules flexible enough that they can "make it work"—writers, psychologists in private practice, teachers of night classes, to name a few. But the vast majority of American women trying to provide for themselves are consumed each day by boring old full-time jobs, and simply "fitting a baby" around this schedule is a daunting—and for many, simply impossible.

And yet, I would argue that this is not a particularly prominent part of the national conversation right now, in spite of the fact that it affects (literally) one in two people in the United States. I earnestly believe that the reason women are still so woefully underrepresented in government, science, and positions of corporate leadership has as much, if not more, to do with these structural factors than with personal discrimination or bias—and that no matter how much we progress in terms of the latter, it won't matter if we can't fix the former. In fact—and part of me hates to say this—I suspect that sometimes the continued focus on personal discrimination or gender bias distracts from these basic conversations. People think, "But I'm not prejudiced! Of *course* I believe a woman can do anything a man can do, and it would be bigoted to believe otherwise," and then they tend to just tune out—assuming all their actions will inevitably conform with this fundamental belief...when in reality, they don't. Meanwhile, several crucially important problems continue to be ignored.

2) **Diversifying our voices.** To add to this frustration, the wonderful, brave, inspiring, and extremely intelligent women who have taken the stage recently (albeit, each in her own particular way) to highlight these issues are not exactly representative of the broader population that the issues actually affect. Women like Sheryl Sandberg, Elsa Walsh, and Marissa Mayer are extraordinarily successful, and each has had both the financial means and the support of key people at home (namely, their husbands) to be able to be both great moms *and* great at their respective jobs. (They admit to not "having it all," but I'd argue that each has come pretty darn close.) However, these women are the exception, not the rule. Moreover, it's unfortunate but true that most of the wage gains women have made in the past few decades have gone to the top twenty percent of women—according to a report released by the Council on Contemporary Families—and that childless women have also made far more wage progress than mothers. Inequality in pay persists between men and women, but it's important to remember that it also persists *among* women—a major roadblock if we as a gender are to make the strides forward we wish to make. Generations before us fought for *all* women, not just for some, and perhaps it is time to hand the microphone to a few in that other eighty percent.

3) **My own blindness.** I, like many women my age, have taken the women's movement that came before me for granted. I've never really questioned the idea of women as equal: the valedictorian and

salutatorian of my high school class were both female; one went to Yale, the other to Harvard, and they are both now in medical school. My courses in college were packed with eager young women, many who attained better grades and received higher accolades than their male counterparts. I've seen brilliant girls launch technology start-ups; even I landed a job post-college that many young men would have likely grabbed, if given the chance. And now, in my office, I see women in leadership positions—including women with children—and I have never been witness to an incident of sexual harassment or overt sexual discrimination.

But as grateful as I am for this wonderful world I live in, I now recognize that I've been blind for a long time to problems that still lurk under the surface, biases that linger on—and I'm not just talking about in the workplace, or in society at large. I'm embarrassed to admit that—when I truly think about it—my *own* expectations for women do not quite conform with mine for men; I think that, subconsciously, and in spite of all I know, I hold members of the two sexes to slightly different standards. I'm more ashamed to admit that I take a more competitive attitude when it comes to other females than I do with males. It makes no logical sense: aren't I competing for the same jobs and opportunities as men my age? And yet, I catch myself unknowingly complying with the antiquated idea that there is *only so much space* out there for bright young women, and I want to be one of the lucky ones to occupy it. If we as individuals keep thinking like this, women will never attain true equality. And what's more, we'll never challenge ourselves to each reach our highest potential. I hope to alter this mindset and eradicate these differences, starting first and foremost with myself.

4) The Appearance Factor. I don't want to spend too much time on this, because I fundamentally believe it is not nearly as important as the other issues I have mentioned—nor is it as difficult to overcome, or at least to ignore. But: it is in many ways true that women have this whole other “appearance” thing to worry about that just does not affect men in quite the same way. Do I think I would not sit at the same desk I sit in each day if I looked a different way? No. Do I think there aren't plenty of men out there who get discriminated against, or even chastised, for being overweight? Of course not. But I do believe that judgment (from *both* sexes) is harsher when it comes to females. We tend to pay much more attention to our appearance, and hold ourselves to harsher standards and stricter requirements, than the men around us do. It's a small thing (and I think we each can do our part to help each other, even just by talking about it), but it would certainly be nice to be relieved of some of this pressure—because between advancing in the workplace, raising a family, and solving world peace, we just don't have time to worry about things that are so superficial and ultimately superfluous. And yet, so many of us, myself included, do.

5) Initiating the Conversation. As I mentioned, I was surrounded in college by impressive women: tomorrow's doctors, teachers, politicians, artists, and engineers. I also saw young women, with visible passion and rigor, embrace causes such as fighting sexual violence and standing up for LGBT rights—both efforts I deeply respect. But yet, I never once sat down with a group of women and talked about these other issues, issues that would inevitably affect almost each and every one of us one day. I never took part in a constructive conversation that went beyond abstractions (or moved past the feminist theories I read in a gender studies class): what are we *actually* going to do? Or, more aptly, what *can* we actually do? *What are the options?* And if the options aren't good enough, *how do we change them?* It's time to begin this conversation—not at thirty-five when we may be married and deep into careers and feel stuck or lost or ambivalent—but now, when we can initiate the fight. Right now is when we can build

foundations: we can *create* the options, instead of one day lamenting that they aren't there. I am by no means saying that the logistical details of our lives need to be planned out years in advance; that would be ridiculous, unnecessary, and needlessly stressful. But it may be useful to start this conversation earlier—embracing it with the fire we've shown on these other awareness campaigns—thereby setting the wheels in motion to affect the kind of change that will, someday, lead to real equality and real choice.

[Observation by a woman, single, age early 20s, employed]

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I agree, to an extent, that part of the “Female Advantage” is in an increased willingness to compromise and cooperate. However, the female politician I worked for (and am still fairly close with) was a firm and strong leader

What I saw in my (admittedly limited) exposure to politics was that, to men, politics is a game. Politics is about conquest and victory. The male politician I worked for lived and breathed politics, sought power for its own sake, and loved to win.

For the female politician I worked for, politics was just a job. She cared little about conquest or victory, often citing that Truman quote about not caring “who gets the credit.” She takes her job seriously, but doesn't let it consume her. For her, the motivation to do well is her career, in the same way that a lawyer or doctor strives to do good work. She finds no excitement in others losing.

However I'm not sure that this is true of the well-known female governors and senators—it seems that often the women who are elected are the ones who act like men. But I do think there is great value in electing women who do not have that traditionally-male desire to win and make others lose.

[Observation by a man, College Senior]

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“Men are threatened by the fact that women can create life.”

[comment by a woman- single age 40]

Whether or not a person (usually women but increasingly men) can have it all depends on how you define “all” and it depends on the nature of each element of your, career, family, other thing and how you define them. You may not have the choice of limiting each element to a combination that lets it be possible.

[comment—woman, employed full-time, married, age early 50s]

Women tend to do a better job of listening to people/voters.

[comment – woman]

One of the things that I find most objectionable are 7:30 a.m. meetings in the morning.

[comments – several women, married, children at home, employed full-time]

You get up each morning, take a quick shower, pick a black suit or a blue suit, a white shirt or blue shirts, a red tie or a black tie, and head off to work. When I get up the first thing I do is check my schedule to determine how much attention I need to pay to my hair and how I dress because I know that those things will draw attention in various meetings. Then I get the kids up and give them breakfast and see them off to school and then I return to getting myself ready.

[comment – woman, married, children, employed full-time
age early 40s]

When I was interviewing people for jobs, men would reach out without reservation. Women would ask whether I thought they could do the job.

[comment – woman, married, retired from government,
age early 60s]

Women work through issues, they listen, voice opinion, men start fighting.

[comment – woman, age 45]

Women have definitely taken over the family.

[comment – woman]

Do not let the country go backwards as relates to women's rights.

[comment – woman, employed in financial community,
age late 50s]

Women should step forward on their own behalf and they can have it all.

[comment – senior woman executive, age 40s]

Women have a natural instinct to want to be loved – that is not the same for men.
[comment – woman, married, retired, age 60s]

We have created a situation where it is impossible for women to raise families and pursue professional careers outside of the home without family or career suffering – at very high levels, jobs that required extraordinary numbers of hands are very difficult.
[comment – woman, married, retired, age 60s]

Most women who are speaking out on this subject, such as Sandberg and Slaughter do not represent the average American female worker.
[comment – woman, married, employed full-time, age 40s]

Do husbands of professional occupied women really carry their weight?
[comment – woman, married, young children, employed full-time, age late 30s]

Many women who have balanced full-time work outside the home and raising a family eventually express guilt about the amount of attention they are not giving to their children.
[observation]

A Woman with two children in grade school, appears to be the principal breadwinner, husband works from home, when asked whether she feels guilty about being away from her children so much, says she feels a little bit guilty. She goes on to say she really believes she would not be a good full-time mother and believes there are any number of women like her.
[comment – woman, married, young children, employed full-time, age mid 40s]

Men believe the world is their oyster. There are different male views of marriage. Men have a sense of entitlement.
[comment – woman, married, employed full-time, age late 50s]