

ESSAY

State of the Sisters

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The Revolution in support of women's rights began in America in the 1960s. But, asks a leading expert and theorist, have those considered being role models in the US lost their way- and are the true fighters for feminine dignity and equality now to be found in the developing world?

In the fall of 1991, after an unprecedented decline in women's representation in the Swedish parliament, nine women gathered around a kitchen table in Stockholm to organize a group they named the Support Stockings. They declared its membership "secret". That way (and with the help of stickers plastered in the parliament building's men's rooms that read "Little Sister Is Watching You"), they figured the male establishment would imagine a vast web of feminist conspirators. The Support Stockings quickly became exactly that: vast, spawning more than 120 other feminist groups nationwide and ushering in what came to be known as "the women's revolution".

In the spring of 1994, nearly 40 percent of Swedes answered yes to this poll question: "Would you consider voting for a women's party headed by [Support Stockings leader] Maria-Pia Boethius?" The leaders of the powerful Social Democrats panicked, and promised to make at least half of their own candidate's women in the upcoming election if the Stockings abandoned the idea of forming a party. As a result, that fall, Swedes elected what was then the most female government in the world: a parliament that was 41 percent women, and a cabinet that was 50 percent (including the speaker of the parliament and the foreign affairs minister). In his inaugural address, Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson vowed that the new Social Democratic government would stand, first and foremost, for gender equality.

Talking with Boethius one day in 1995 as we sat at her now-famous kitchen table, I said, "I wish American feminism could be so ingenious and effective." Boethius considered my remark with bemused sorrow. "In the 60s and 70s, the world's women looked to the US for inspiration," she said. No longer. To so many, American Feminism seemed increasingly stagnant and sterile. "Now the US should be looking to the world's women."

Nearly 20 years after the Support Stockings, feminism is surging in the developing world and resurgent in the United States. The different character of those revivals bears out Boethius's remark: once again women in the US could be learning from their sisters overseas.

Leaning In

"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY," HANNA ROSIN CONCURRED, "THE GLOBAL ECONOMY IS BECOMING A PLACE WHERE WOMEN ARE FINDING MORE SUCCESS THAN MEN." WOMEN ARE "THE STANDARD BY WHICH SUCCESS IS MEASURED."

At a TED talk in December 2010, Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, declared the start of what has since been dubbed "the second women's revolution". After a one-sentence nod to flextime, training, and other programs that might advance working women, Sandberg declared, "I want to talk about none of that today." What she wanted to talk about was "what we can do as individuals" to climb to the top of the corporate ladder. Her speech was a pep rally encouraging the high-powered to "lean in", so they can "get to the corner office".

The TED talk was a warm-up act. This spring, Sandberg published her book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, with a promotional offensive that rivaled a Hollywood roll-out. The book, accompanied by an online "Lean In" campaign that partnered with a large roster of major corporations, instructed American women to overcome their insecurities about "not being liked" and "have the ambition to lean in to your career and run the world". It catapulted to the top of the bestseller list, as the Lean In website was populated with "positive" testimonials- and only positive testimonials were welcome—from high-achievers (or at least the highly celebrated), recounting their personal "Lean In moment" that allowed them to get ahead. Among the testifiers were Oprah Winfrey, former First Lady Laura Bush (and both of her daughters), Harvard President Drew Faust, fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer, *The New York Times* Executive Editor Jill Abrahamson, *Newsweek* Editor-in-Chief Tina Brown, Dun & Bradstreet CEO Sara Mathew, US Senator Barbara Boxer, Hollywood actress (and Avon's first "Global Ambassador") Reese Witherspoon, and supermodel Tyra Banks.

Lean In's version of feminism success and celebrity besotted, and singularly preoccupied with the concerns of women who have (or desire) the highest net worth is hardly anomalous. The same recessionary period that gave rise to Occupy, a movement championing "the 99 percent", has spawned a new wave of feminism obsessed with the ambitions of a female one percent. Where Occupy's protesters surveyed America's economic polarization with anguish and courage, the new feminists sometimes seem punch drunk on either a giddy triumphalism or, as with the Lean-Inners, an elite aspiration.

In 2009, Maria Shiver, former TV news host and California First Lady, issued *The Shiver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*, which declared that "the battle of the sexes is over". That pronouncement—based on the fact that women were now half of the workforce—received massive media coverage. Shiver's good-news bulletin was followed, in 2012, by Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* and Liza Mundy's *The Richer Sex: How the New Majority of Female Breadwinners Is Transforming Sex, Love and Family*, both of which celebrated the imminent emergence of a female supremacy. Mundy called this the "Big Flip", and predicted we would soon be living in a world "where women routinely support households and out earn the men they are married to" and men "will gladly hitch their wagon to a female star". "For time in history," Hanna Rosin concurred, "the global economy is becoming a place where women are finding more success than men." Women are "becoming the standard by which success is measured".

Even those Second-Women's-Revolutionaries who aren't quite so Pollyanna focus on problems of the privileged. Anne-Marie Slaughter's much-ballyhooed *Atlantic* magazine cover story last year, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All", bemoaned her own difficulties balancing work and family as the first female director of policy planning at the State Department and a tenured professor at Princeton University. She quit the State Department post after two years because, as she wrote in *The Atlantic*, her career was taking her away from her family and distressing her teenage son (she didn't, however, abandon her Ivy League perch—and, in fact, she also quit the State Department because Princeton revokes tenure from its professors who go on leave for more than two years). Her solution to the work-family problem? "It's time to embrace a national happiness

project," she wrote, calling on other "women in power" to "help change the norms"—by talking in the office about their children and their desire for a "balanced life".

Gumption and a Yoga Mat

Slaughter's let's-make-the-corporation-a-happy-place summons was soon taken up by some of her upscale sister travelers. Arianna Huffington, founder of the online media site, *The Huffington Post* (and coiner of the phrase, "the second women's revolution") announced in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes* magazine that this new stage of feminism would be all about improving working women's "well-being"—by getting corporate workplaces to offer yoga classes, meditation areas, and "nap rooms" (for napping adults, that is; onsite child care did not make the well-being list). Her own company, which recently installed two nap rooms, was leading the way: "We at HuffPost launched a free app for the GPS for the Soul, to track your stress level through your heart-rate variability." By "leaning back" through company-sponsored "stress reduction programs", Huffington said, women would "become much better at leaning in" and, thereby, speed their way up the corporate ladder.

These exponents of CEO-and-celebrity feminism imply that the pursuit of structural change is unnecessary: a woman can do anything, all by herself, if she puts her mind to it—and if you don't believe it, just look at how great they're doing. All woman needs, they suggest, aside from her own gumption (and a yoga mat), is a great mate; the Lean In testimonials are full of such marital bragging rights, starting with Sandberg, who likes to announce, "I have an awesome husband, and we're 50/50." A great Mom occasionally comes in handy, too. Here's Tina Brown's "Lean In Moment", as she recounted it on LeanIn.org: persuading her parents to move from England to "the apartment across the corridor from us on East 57th Street in New York", so her mother could take care of the children while Brown took the helm at *The New Yorker*. Who needs day care?

This model is ascendant at the very time when essential efforts on behalf of women in the US—battered women's shelters, welfare justice organizations, women's legal services, and domestic workers' rights groups, to name just a few—are underfunded and struggling, and when

so many women on the ground are facing a perilous and degenerating situation. Ever more draconian restrictions on reproductive rights are metastasizing, with a record 916 bills introduced in state legislatures in the first three months of 2011 alone, 135 anti-abortion state laws passed in the last two years, and 694 even more extreme measures—some seeking to ban abortion even in the first trimester—introduced in the first three months of this year. There are now no abortion providers in 87 percent of US counties. Meanwhile, according to the Census Bureau’s latest statistics, the poverty rate for American women is at its highest point in 17 years (14.5 percent), and the “extreme poverty rate” at the highest point ever recorded (6.3 percent).

As of 2010, 17 million American women were living in poverty, compared with 12.6 million men. The social support system for working mothers in the US ranks at the bottom of the heap of virtually all developed nations (and a good number of developing nations, too). While authors Rosin and Maundy celebrate American women’s predominance in occupations with the largest projected job growth, what gets less play is that these “growth” jobs—home health aide, child care worker, customer service representative, office clerk, food service worker, dental hygienist, medical assistant, etc—are among the lowest paying occupations, with few benefits and little room for advancement. Nor, for that matter, are women making much progress at the other end of the job pyramid: 84-to-98 percent of the people in the top positions of power in every single sector of American life are men, and incremental progress has stalled in recent years.

THE SECOND WOMEN’S REVOLUTION HAS LITTLE RELEVANCE FOR THE WOMEN WHO AREN’T FLYING FIRST CLASS

Sandberg says she favors militating against this latter absence, but her campaign fails to meaningfully connect the struggle at the top with the one at the bottom, a tragic severing. When women like Sandberg enthuse about the support they’ve received from their “awesome” husbands (who often are also awesomely well-off; Sandberg’s spouse, tech entrepreneur David Goldberg, is CEO of Survey Monkey, a company valued at \$1 billion), they turn a blind eye to the more than 50 percent of mothers who will be sole custodial parents at some point in their lives and who have no such luxury: 40 percent of single mothers are both poor and “food insecure”,

despite working more hours than single mothers in any other comparable high-income nation. In short, the Second Women's Revolution has little relevance for the women who aren't flying first class.

Insurgent Feminism

At the same time, outside the US, another model has emerged. The insurgent feminism in the developing world is grassroots, pertinent to the concerns of the vast majority of the female population, and unfolding not in the corner suite but on the street corner. In one country after another, women from a wide range of backgrounds have been expressing outrage over their sex's demeaning and dire straits, often at great risk to their personal safety, but buoyed by collective courage. This is not a revolution launched by a TED talk or a book-tour appearance on *Oprah*, or by appeal to any officially anointed platform. "What's fascinating about these new feminist movements is their independence," *The Guardian* commentator Laurie Penny observed recently. "They're developing organically, outside the well-worn circuit of NGOs, government lobbying and quiet petition-signing that has been the proper format for feminist activism for more than two decades." She dubbed it "vigilante feminism".

A colleague of mine in Cairo who has been following the feminist resurgence there emailed recently: "Between the Women's March and the women self-organizing patrols and safe houses for victims of sexual violence, sisterhood seems as powerful as ever in Egypt." She was amazed, as well, at the lack of attention paid by the American media to the Egyptian women's protests. "Why are they so underreported?" she wrote. "And what can be done?" Women began mobilizing in Cairo last year in mass numbers. They were responding both to the repeated attacks on and rapes of female protesters during and following the Arab Spring—at least 18 women were assaulted in Tahrir Square on the second anniversary of the revolution—and to the new conservative government's disenfranchisement of women. All-female protective teams began forming to rescue victims of sexual harassment and assault from assailants who often include police officers and soldiers conducting so-called "virginity tests".

The teams supply the assaulted women with clothes and shoes (the marauding gangs of men frequently strip their victims) and whisk them to safe houses they've set up. Some women in the safety patrols openly

wield knives, and are prepared to use them. "Don't worry about me," Abeer Haridi, a 40-year-old lawyer, told a reporter at a recent march. "I'm armed." Other all-female collectives have roamed the city, covering walls with graffiti and murals that decry women's humiliating conditions. One of the more ubiquitous painted slogans: "I've opened the floodgates." It is a quote from Fouada, the heroine of the classic Egyptian film, *Something to Fear*, who saves her village from a despot and drought by unleashing a dammed river. The Fouada Watch, an initiative launched last year, issued monthly bulletins on the new government's policies on women and distributed 106,000 stickers and posters across Egypt, calling on people to vote "no" in December's constitutional referendum for what they regarded as the failure of its proposed provisions to protect women's right.

River of Protest

In India, the brutal gang rape and beating of a 23-year-old medical student on a Delhi bus the same month undammed its own river of protest. Even before the young woman died 13 days later of her injuries, an uprising was underway on the streets, and the torrent of fury over police and politicians' indifference showed no signs of abating as thousands of demonstrators endured tear gas and water cannons. Hundreds of students stormed the city council and forced a session with the home minister. By late December, reporters were wondering if they were witnessing the start of what one of them called the "Feminist Spring". Thanks to the demonstrations, the government finally began to address the epidemic of sexual assault (in 2011, India had 24,206 reported cases, 17 percent of them in New Delhi, known as the "rape capital"), and passed legislation against sexual violence. Six alleged assailants of the young woman on the bus were arrested and put on trial in a fast-track court.

The protests against sexual violence rapidly spread across India and throughout South Asia. Rallies and marches clogged the streets from Sri Lanka, to Pakistan, to Bangladesh. In Nepal, after a 21-year-old woman reported being raped and threatened with death by a police officer and robbed by immigration agents, hundreds of protesters descended on the prime minister's home in Kathmandu, demanding an overhaul of the laws and changes in attitudes toward women. "We had seen the power of the mass campaign in Delhi's rape case," Anita Thapa, a demonstrator, said. "It is a pure people's movement."

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POPULIST AND ELITIST IMPULSES,
AND BETWEEN COMMUNITARIAN AND CORPORATE ACTIVISM,
CONCEALS AN UNRECOGNIZED COMMONALITY**

The developing-world's street mobilizations and the US executive-suite movement are obviously responding to different needs—women in many Third World countries face issues of safety that Americans would consider unthinkable desperate. And they are faced with many political cross-currents, among them rising religious restrictions and social prejudice against the cause of women's liberation for, ironically, being associated with the old dictatorial regimes. But the difference between mass rallies against rape and calls for company nap rooms, between populist and elitist impulses and between communitarian and corporate activism, conceals an unrecognized commonality. Both models of feminism are engaged with the capitalism prevalent in their societies, as feminism has always been. The women's movement in the developing world may be different from the women's movement in the US to the degree that capitalism in these nations is different.

Women's ability to work outside the home, which permitted the kind of independence that got enshrined through political action, began with the dawn of the industrial age. Women are not only industrial capitalism's earliest laborers, they were also among the first to take to the streets to demand their rights. As the female workforce of the textile mills in the United States led the movement for a 10-hour work day, they also agitated for women's equality. As the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported of a strike leader at the New England mills in the 1830s, she gave a "flaming Mary Woolstomecroft [sic] speech on the rights of the women and the iniquities of the 'monied aristocracy'." The forces of industrialization propelled women out of home, freed them from the fetters of the patriarchal family, and set them loose in urban areas with few social controls, so creating an environment in which women began to see themselves as equal. Along with that came a new vision of citizenship, and the need to organize against oppressive conditions. The "mill girls" understood then as the women protesting in Egypt and India do now, that survival required that they act as a group, not as individuals. All the lone "leaning in" in the world wasn't going to help them. As the petition signed by hundreds of women during the 1834 Lowell Mill strike concluded: "Resolved: That none of us

will go back, unless they receive us all as one." In that way, among others, capitalism could be said to be feminism's midwife and ally.

Torches of Freedom

It would prove a troublesome ally. Capitalism, in its more "mature" form, has defeated feminist aims as much as advanced them. The rise of consumer capitalism, coinciding with the 1920 passage of women's suffrage in the US, hijacked American feminist aspirations and rechanneled them into the marketplace, where women were urged to express their "individuality" through the purchase of "liberating" products. The co-option was overt. Rather than agitate for better working conditions, Hoover ads at the time entreated women to experience "positive agitation" at home with the new vacuum technology's "revolutionary cleaning principle". "An Ancient Prejudice Has Been Removed", the banner on a Lucky Strike ad read, above a flapper relishing her cigarette. At the behest of the American Tobacco Company, Edward Bernays, the founding father of public relations (and nephew of Sigmund Freud), organized a procession of debutantes to troop down 5th Avenue during the Easter Parade, asserting their "right" to smoke in public by puffing "torches of freedom". Over and over, women's search for dignity was reenacted as farce.

Where industrial capitalism had provoked women to organize and change society, consumer capitalism seduced women into submission to a mass-produced culture. American (and much of Western) feminism has been trapped in that model ever since, despite the efforts of late-60s radical feminists to repudiate the consumer armament of cosmetics, girdles, and hair spray—literally, in their 1968 protests against the Miss America Pageant, when they hurled those "instruments of female torture" into a "Freedom Trash Can".

In post-industrial society, feminism has been hopelessly conflated with the expression of the self, a "self" that is increasingly envisioned as a marketable consumer object. Small wonder that Lady Gaga is hailed by many as American feminism's 'new face'. It's hard to identify anything, other than her successful self-marketing campaign that accounts for the mantle. (Gaga's own words provide little illumination: she's variously said that she is a feminist, or "guesses" she might be "a little bit of a feminist",

or is “not a feminist” at all, because “I love men. I celebrate American male culture, and beer, and bars and muscle cars.”) In any event, Lady Gaga is just the latest in a long line of pop-star ersatz feminists that stretches from 1920s “It Girl” Clara Bow, to 1960s “The Girl” Marlo Thomas, to the 1990s Spice Girls.

In the era of the Second Women’s Revolution, no longer is it just capitalists trying to invoke feminism to advance their brand commercial and corporate products. Now it’s women invoking capitalism to advance their own commercial and corporate brand of feminism. Exhibit A is Facebook’s Sandberg and her “Lean In Community”—one you can only join via Facebook. As *The New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd smartly said of Sandberg’s effort (in an article that inspired a nasty attack by Sandberg’s supporters): “She says she’s using marketing for the purpose of social idealism. But she’s actually using social idealism for the purpose of marketing.”

The West enjoys its “post-industrial” status to the degree that it can export its industries to Third World regions, where workers, often disproportionately female, produce the fashions that American women wear, and the computers and tablets and smart phones they use to log onto Facebook and LeanIn.org. The workplace conditions recall their 19th century Western precursors: long hours at poverty wages, harsh and unsafe work environments, overcrowded and substandard dormitories. The lethal explosions in the iPad factories in southwest China in 2011 came on the hundred-year anniversary of the 1911 fire that killed 146 garment workers in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, New York City’s worst ever industrial accident. This April, over 1,000 people died as a result of the horrific collapse of a Dhaka building housing clothing factories for many major Western retailers, the deadliest accident in the history of the garment industry. The disaster followed on the heels of several other garment factory fires in Bangladesh that have killed more than 500 workers since 2006. (Bangladesh is now the second largest apparel exporter in the world; its 80 percent female workforce makes the clothes sold everywhere from Walmart to The Gap to United Colors of Benetton).

Shaking the Planet

Outsourced industrialism can replicate the symbiotic relationship with feminism that women wage earners in countries like the United States and England enjoyed a century ago—the collective experience of mass-manufacturing labor leading to the collective experience of rebellion against its disfiguring effects. In that sense, you could say the US has outsourced its communitarian feminism along with its manufacturing jobs.

The cautionary prospect is that the honeymoon won't last long: the period between industrially induced liberation and consumerist-driven conformity, never protracted, seems to be ever shrinking. The honeymoon is short-lived because, along with its unwanted jobs the US is exporting its commercial and celebrity culture—a culture that invariably serves to undermine attention to the real plight of the vast majority of women. The 23-year-old Indian medical student whose brutal gang rape set off mass demonstrations in Delhi was paying her tuition bill by working the all-night shift at an outsourced firm, a call center where she handled question from Canadians about their home mortgages. The global media promotion of Western consumerism was already suggesting to her a new set of aspirations, as we evident in a profile of her in *The Wall Street Journal* that ran shortly after her death.

As she amassed some money of her own. She enjoyed figuring out how to spend it. Lately, she had her eye on a Samsung Smartphone. One day she hoped to buy an Audi. "I want to build a big house, buy a car, go abroad and will work there," her friend, the software engineer, recalled her saying.

The US has long prided itself on its "soft" exports, its offerings of virtuous civic conduct to supposedly more benighted regions. Those exports have either been forces for relative good (the Peace Corps, say) or destructive hubris ("bringing democracy" to Vietnam or Iraq). For better or ill, feminism has been part of this mix, whether in the flurry of micro-financing endeavors championed by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn in their book, *Half the Sky*, or in the One Billion Rising campaign against gender violence launched by *The Vagina Monologues* author Eve Ensler, or in the many Western-sponsored campaigns to save

Third World women from global sex-traffickers. Those efforts at virtue can, and often do, boomerang—as when the young prostitutes “saved” by Kristof famously fled his ministrations and returned to their brothel. Nor is it clear how One Billion Rising’s recent hallmark event—a global female dance-a-thon this Valentine’s Day—actually aided raped and battered women, though the organization’s website maintains that it “shook the planet”. On the other hand, such endeavors as the Network of East West Women, founded by feminist scholars and writers Ann Snitow, Nanette Funk and Sonia Jaffe Robbins in the early 1990s, forged effective coalitions between American and eastern European feminists after the fall of Communism, precisely because its founders understood that Eastern European women were in the better position to judge their own situation. As Ann Snitow, the Director of Gender Studies at the New School University in New York, observed in a speech in 1992: “Western feminists should never consider a project that doesn’t originate from women in the region... A Western feminist entering this scene had better learn right away that she is not the first to arrive with an ideology crafted in another place and fostered by resources locally unknown.”

Common Cause

The razzmatazz of CEO-and-celebrity feminism in the West has attracted voices once associated with a thornier feminist radicalism—Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, and *The Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt have all praised the Lean In campaign. More troubling, the revolution at the top has so far proved alarmingly blind to the need for revolution at the bottom—in particular, the bottom of some of the very corporations that have allied themselves with Lean In. One would be hard put to imagine DuPont or Dow jumping to sponsor feminist radicals (or any radicals) back in the 1960s. But the list of Lean In’s official corporate “partners” reads like a who’s who of radicalism’s least trusted institutions: Chevron, Bank of America, Citibank, Merck & Co, Procter & Gamble, Goldman Sachs, and, yes, DuPont. On the Lean In roster of corporate partners are a disturbing number of companies that have recently been sued for sex discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment, or unfair promotion practices and wrongful termination based on gender. One corporation proud to be a Lean In partner (“As we lean in to empower women, it helps

us to better serve our customers, develop the best talent, and strengthen our communities," its CEO and president, Mike Duke, intoned on the Lean In site), is none other than Walmart, currently facing nearly two thousand sex discrimination grievances from female employees in 48 states.

The "second women's revolution" in the United States won't be a healthy force for change until it tethers the one percent to the 99 percent, until it can find a way to liberate working women on the factory and retail floor with at least the fervor with which it seeks to advance the fortunes of women in the executive suites. Until that common cause occurs, American feminism will have to look on enviously at the real revolutions being fought abroad.

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