Miss Education
Why women's success in higher education hasn't led to more female leaders
BY GARANCE FRANKE-RUTA

In her new book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, recounts a warning she delivered to Harvard Business School students in 2011. "About one-third of the women in this audience will be working full-time" in 15 years, she told them. "And almost all of you will be working for the guy you are sitting next to."

Surveying the stubborn gender inequalities of the early-21st-century workplace, Sandberg has written what might best be described as a cross between a feminist treatise and an airport business book, in which she advocates for structural changes to make corporate America more hospitable to women—particularly mothers. She also issues a bracing call for women to propel themselves ever higher, take more risks, speak up, negotiate, and pull a seat up to the table. But for all the persuasive parts of her argument, a vexing contradiction remains mostly unaddressed. In one important arena, women have already, to borrow Sandberg's phrase, been aggressively leaning in: school. Women surpassed men as a percentage of college students in the late 1980s, and by 2009 had become the majority of master's-degree students and doctoral candidates. The majority of Americans older than 25 with college degrees are, today, women. Yet just 4.2 percent of *Fortune* 500 CEOs are women. So why hasn't women's success in the academy led them to more leadership positions in the work world?

Forty years ago, Title IX mandated equality for women. But it did so only in schools. In the decades since Congress passed this law, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in education, women have flocked to the ivory tower. There, enforced equal standing is coupled with criteria for success that are transparent, and that reward industriousness. Many parts of the work world, by comparison, are still plagued by sexism, or reward a particular sort of self-promotion that many women shy away from. Studies have repeatedly shown that women get more criticism and less praise in the workplace than men do. They are offered lower starting salaries, and are judged more negatively by prospective employers than are men with identical backgrounds. And unlike in school, the burden of fighting discrimination rests almost entirely on an individual, who must initiate grievance procedures against her boss.

Just as important, the behaviors that school rewards—studying, careful preparation, patient climbing from one level to the next—seem to give women an advantage academically, judging from the fact that they get higher grades in college than men do. Yet these behaviors aren't necessarily so helpful in the workplace. Out in the work world, people hire and promote based on personality as much as on formal qualifications, and very
often networking can trump grinding away. As Whitney Johnson and Tara Mohr put it in an article on the Harvard Business Review’s Web site earlier this year, “The very skills that propel women to the top of the class in school are earning us middle-of-the-pack marks in the workplace.”

It can take young women years to realize that the professional world is less of a meritocracy than the school world, and that the strategies that lead to success in one realm may not be enough to master the other. In the meantime, many suffer from what Carol Frohlinger and Deborah Kolb, the founders of Negotiating Women Inc., a firm that coaches women in leadership skills, call “tiara syndrome”—the belief that if they “keep doing their job well, someone will notice them and place a tiara on their head.” This tends not to happen.

Women begin to fall behind the moment they leave school. Even controlling for their college major and professional field, they wind up being paid 7 percent less than men, on average, one year after graduating, according to a 2012 study by the American Association of University Women. One reason is that they take fewer risks right out of the gate: they are much less likely to negotiate their first salary—57 percent of men do this, versus 7 percent of women. Compared with their male peers, women also set less ambitious goals. A McKinsey study published last April found that 36 percent of male employees at major companies hope to be top executives, compared with just 18 percent of female employees. I’ve heard countless stories that reflect this same divide. Stephanie Mencimer, now a reporter at Mother Jones, told me that when she was a hiring editor at The Washington Monthly, she marveled at how, among comparably credentialed applicants just out of school, women were more likely to apply to be interns, while men would apply to be editors at the magazine.

The university system aside, I suspect there is another, deeply ingrained set of behaviors that also undermine women: the habits they pick up—or don’t pick up—in the dating world. Men learn early that to woo women, they must risk rejection and be persistent. Straight women, for their part, learn from their earliest years that they must wait to be courted. The professional world does not reward the second approach. No one is going to ask someone out professionally if she just makes herself attractive enough. I suspect this is why people who put together discussion panels and solicit op-eds always tell me the same thing: it’s harder to get women to say yes than men. Well, duh. To be female in our culture is to be trained from puberty in the art of rebuffing—rebuffing gazes, comments, touches, propositions, and proposals.

Sensing that they are not prepared for the world they have entered, many professional women seek still more academic credentials. I’ve come to think of this as intellectual primping—the frequently futile hope that one more degree will finally win notice, and with it, that perfect job or raise. Eight years ago, Anna Fels, a New York City psychiatrist in her 60s, published a book called Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women’s Changing Lives. She told me she has since noticed that, in the wake of gains unimaginable when she was young, women today may have a harder time seeing the barriers before them than did the women of her generation. “Women may think the more degrees they get, the more chances they have of being hired,” she says, “but they are swimming upstream.”

In the 20th century, women often needed to be better-credentialed than men to get to the same place—for example, female Pulitzer Prize winners tended to be better-educated than men who won the same award. But in the 21st century, education is clearly no panacea.

LISTEN UP, LADIES

SHERYL SANDBERG is the latest fabulously successful woman to wade into the fabulously lucrative business of hawkwing work/life advice books (and/or magazine cover stories). A survey of the not-so-diverse perspectives on offer.

Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO
In a nutshell: “Don’t leave before you leave.” Select aphorism: “We need more men to sit at the table...the kitchen table.”

Mika Brzezinski, Morning Joe co-host
In a nutshell: Be your own advocate. Boldest multitasking: Called in to Morning Joe strategy sessions while jogging. Bad-mother anecdote: Exhausted from working nights, once fell down the stairs with her infant daughter, who broke a leg.

Kate White, former Cosmopolitan editor
In a nutshell: “Go big or go home.” Bad-mother anecdote: Stopped going to her son’s dentist appointments when he was 12. Six years later, learned that he hadn’t been since.

Cathie Black, former Hearst Magazines chair
In a nutshell: Strive for the “360” Life. Select aphorism: “Think of your boss as a small woodland animal—make no startling moves or strange gestures.” On finding balance: “Even if you’re ambitious, it’s not a crime to leave at five-thirty on some days.” Worth dog-eating: “Don’t get drunk.”

THE ATLANTIC APRIL 2013 29