

# A fairer future for women at work in Australia KRISTINE ZIWICA

Leaning Out

The Crikey. Read

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**KRISTINE ZIWICA** 

Hardie Grant

Nearly a decade ago, Facebook's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, published a book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, that became a cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It had a dazzlingly simple proposition: through sheer will and individual self-empowerment, women could overcome decades of gender inequality in the workplace.

Sandberg's basic premise was that women often hold themselves back from reaching leadership positions for a number of reasons, including a lack of self-confidence and concerns about balancing work and family. Her manifesto, part corporate playbook, part bible for her legions of devoted followers, spawned a 'confidence industrial complex' dedicated to teaching women how to 'power pose' their way to the C-suite. It also diverted a generation of women into the fruitless task of forming supportive Lean In Circles, attending workshops to share personal experiences and negotiation tips, and completing post—Lean In Circle meeting homework.

Could there be a more potent symbol for everything that was wrong with lean-in feminism than the idea of

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women doing the homework necessary to overcome their own oppression?

It was clear from the start who *Lean In* and its particular brand of feminism was for, and who it wasn't. The 'Lean In' woman was typically a high-earning, white corporate woman determined to reach the highest echelons of corporate power.

And it was also clear from the start what kind of advocacy, if any, *Lean In* prescribed: advocacy on one's own behalf. Naked self-interest dressed up as being for the collective good. More than one commentator observed that the solutions *Lean In* offered were highly influenced by the principles of neoliberalism, a form of free market capitalism. *Lean In* ignored the *structural* issues that hold women back and had little to say about how they could be *collectively* tackled.

The publication of *Lean In* came on the heels of the global financial crisis of 2008, which upended global markets and imperilled a generation of men's and women's economic security. It is telling that at a critical juncture in time – a time when a global crisis could have prompted a fundamental reimagining of the systems and structures that shape (and undermine) women's working lives and their financial security – the answer for women came in the form of individual empowerment, and individual empowerment alone.

Now, a decade on, another crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic – has prompted another opportunity for a reimagining. But, too often, women in Australia are still being told to lean in – ironically at precisely a moment, midpandemic, when so many are tempted to 'lean out', or have borne the brunt of each wave of COVID that's forced them out of the workplace in far greater numbers than men.

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This disconnect between the pandemic-fuelled exodus of women from the workplace, the factors that drove that exodus and the solutions on offer, has been striking. Once again, *Lean In* and the kind of neoliberal, corporate feminism it represented didn't have the answers we so desperately needed.

\* \* \*

As the pandemic has unfolded over the last two-plus painful years, one thing has become clear: data has consistently painted a worrying picture of COVID's disproportionate impact on women, their work, and their ability to earn and save. Women were over-represented in the industries affected by job losses or lost hours,<sup>2</sup> and when schools and childcare shut, women took on a far greater share of the domestic burden of unpaid housework and childcare.<sup>3</sup>

In a study for the *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* economists Leonora Risse and Angela Jackson underscored the extent of that gendered impact.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, women experienced the bulk of the cumulative losses in employment throughout the first twelve months of the pandemic, losing the equivalent of a 55 per cent share of the total months of lost employment despite comprising only 47 per cent of the total employment prior to the pandemic.

As the graph from Risse and Jackson's study shows, the pandemic-fuelled downturn was most definitely shaping up to be a 'she-cession', whereas the global financial crisis was dubbed a 'mancession'. Some even warned that the exodus of women from paid work and the factors driving that exodus could stall, or even reverse, the tenuous gains women had made to bridge the gender gaps in Australian workplaces.

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1990s Recession Global Financial Crisis COVID-19 Recession N -100.000No net loss -200,000 in women's difference in employment employment -300,000 --400,000 --500.000 --600.000 --700.000 --800.000-900.000

Figure 1 Change in employment during economic downturns by gender, Australia

Source: Risse and Jackson, 2021. Authors' calculations using ABS Labour Force, Australia. Seasonally-adjusted data series. Net change in national employment measured from the pre-period to the peak of each economic downturn.

■ Men ■ Women

Some experts went further, dubbing the economic impacts of the pandemic a 'mum-cession' due to the even more pronounced impact it was having on women with children.

In Australia, the 'motherhood penalty' was already deeply entrenched even before the pandemic. In fact, it was getting worse. This penalty, an umbrella term coined to encapsulate the myriad injustices that contribute to mothers' inequality in the workplace, captures all of the things that have long contributed to a career cliff edge of sorts for too many working mothers, forcing them onto a 'mummy track' of poor pay and poor prospects – if they manage to continue working at all. It includes the 'chores gap': the fact that women shoulder the lion's share of unpaid care and domestic work, the lack of flexible work or equitable parental leave policies for fathers and mothers to help level that domestic playing field, the

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lack of access to affordable childcare, and gender-based discrimination, including pregnancy discrimination.

In September 2021, as the pandemic entered its second year, the unemployment figures again showed that COVID-19 was continuing to have an outsized impact on women's employment. Between May and August, 90,000 women lost their jobs, compared to 25,000 men.<sup>6</sup> In New South Wales alone, nearly two-thirds of all jobs lost since the lockdown in that state began in June were held by women.

What's more, women were more likely to drop out of the labour force altogether – meaning they were no longer counted in employment statistics – with 4.1 per cent of women in New South Wales no longer looking for work compared to 2.8 per cent of men. According to Matt Grudnoff, a senior economist at the Australia Institute, excluding the depths of the pandemic recession in April and May of 2020, the female workforce participation rate had only fallen that sharply once before, way back in July 1988.

And even though women's employment recovered to a large extent after each wave of the pandemic – something the Coalition government was keen to brandish as a victory (job done, nothing to see here, folks) – what might the future hold for women so entirely battered by wave after wave of the pandemic? And what has the pandemic taught us about the fragile foundations of women's working lives? And finally, what have we learned about the fragile state of our care infrastructure, the patchwork of childcare, aged care and disability support services that underpin many women's ability to work? In the absence of these services it usually falls to women to provide that care for free.

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'You can dress this up as everything is okay,' Angela Jackson from Equity Economics told me about attempts to paint a rosy sheen on Australia's post-lockdown economic and workplace outlook for women, 'but we know women in Australia are falling behind globally. Rather than focus on the spin, we could act on what the pandemic has taught us about the need for structural reform.'8

But would we? Could we?

\* \* \*

Women were 'weary and whiplashed', Associate Professor Elizabeth Hill and Professor Rae Cooper wrote. And they weren't optimistic about the future. According to a Deloitte study published in May 2021, three-quarters of the Australian women surveyed said that their workload had increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, and close to two-thirds said household commitments had increased too. Job satisfaction had declined from 69 per cent pre-pandemic to 47 per cent. Most worryingly of all, almost one in four women were considering leaving the workforce, with potentially grave consequences for their long-term economic security.

Even before the pandemic, women retired with, on average, half the super of men, and women over the age of fifty-five were the fastest growing portion of the homeless population. Around the world, 'feminised poverty', a term first coined by Professor Diana Pearce, has long been an issue, and Australia is no different. On every measure used to assess wealth and poverty from cradle to grave, women are poorer than men.

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As I pondered this bleak outlook for Australian women, I reflected on a January 2020 interview I conducted with Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins about what might lie ahead on the gender equality horizon in the year to come (of course, no one could have seen the pandemic coming). She warned that Australian women were, essentially, in a situation where they would have to fight just to 'hold' the ground they had gained. 'More than in the past, [we] need to keep holding ground as a top priority – we can't take anything for granted.'

By mid-2020, Australian women had decidedly shifted from a situation where they were 'holding ground' to one where they were most certainly losing ground – and fast.

Australia continued its uninterrupted backwards slide in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap<sup>12</sup> rankings, slipping from fifteenth out of 153 countries in 2006 when the ranking was first published, to fiftieth in 2021, a dramatic fall of thirty-five places. But the biggest drop, it's worth noting in the context of the issues I'll canvass in this book, was of fifty-eight places in the women's 'economic participation and opportunity' category – essentially the category that is defined by women's ability to work and earn. Australia dropped from twelfth in 2006 to seventieth in 2021.

And, I couldn't help but notice, there was a troubling correlation between this backwards slide, the emergence of corporate lean-in feminism and the election of a Coalition government at the federal level here in Australia. Almost all of it happened from 2013 onwards.

How did we get here?

A dominant strain of corporate lean-in feminism, unleashed in 2013, coincided with the beginning of nearly

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a decade of federal Liberal–National leadership. Successive Coalition governments were only too happy to see gender equality exclusively through the narrow lean-in lens of individual women's empowerment while ignoring the broader structural issues. Through this unholy marriage, gender equality, and what might be done to address it, was narrowly defined.

Now, after a decade of thwarted progress, things are changing. Women in Australia are once again embracing a more revolutionary, radical brand of feminism that could – at long last – drive structural change. What has nearly a decade of leaning in and power posing given us? Pilates in a pencil skirt – yes that was a thing! – was of little use during a pandemic when the fragile foundations of women's working lives crumbled and exposed how vulnerable they were.

This was on full display at the Women's Marches in early 2021, when thousands took to the streets in numbers not seen for decades. A generation of younger women – like Grace Tame, Brittany Higgins, Saxon Mullins, Chanel Contos, Nyadol Nyuon, Teela Reid, Moana Hope, Aretha Brown, AJ Clementine (and many others) – were inspiring a more muscular strain of speaking truth to power. And their calls for justice for women soon expanded to include calls for economic justice for women. They took on issues for women at work that had, in the past, fallen outside the focus of corporate feminists.

And yes, women were angry, and rightly so. And maybe that anger makes some a bit uncomfortable after a decade of more palatable, pink-washed, corporate feminism.

But here's the thing about the 'angry feminist' trope. It's actually quite useful to be angry, despite what some feminists would have us believe, the kind who spend their lives

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suppressing overt expressions of their rage, lest they be tarred with the 'angry feminist' brush.

A 2014 article in *Psychology Today*, 'Go Forth in Anger', highlighted a growing body of research from social and evolutionary biologists, psychologists and brain scientists that dented the long-held view that anger is a negative or destructive emotion.<sup>13</sup> Anger can be a force for good, the research showed, decreasing levels of the stress hormone cortisol, thereby helping people calm down and get ready to address a problem. According to researchers, anger is an 'approach emotion' that fuels optimism, creative brainstorming and problem solving by focusing the mind and mood in highly refined ways. It's the opposite of fear, sadness, disgust and anxiety, all feelings that prompt avoidance.

But anger and its associated benefits have been – until recently – denied women, in particular Black women and women of colour. Just a year later, *Psychology Today* published another article, 'Why Don't We Trust Angry Women?', which highlighted new research that found women who expressed their anger in impassioned speeches intended to persuade others were less likely to get results compared to men.<sup>14</sup>

As someone who has spent nearly two decades campaigning for change armed with data and a hefty side order of calm, I've been feeling the benefits of a fuel injection of anger.

We've made 'the case for change'. Now it's time to demand it.

And that anger has also stirred another powerful emotion, hope. But not hope in the passive sense, hope in the active sense. As Rebecca Solnit wrote, 'Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency.'15

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To my mind, the millions of angry women now speaking out have wagered on the power of their experiences, the power of their voices to serve as the axe that breaks down doors.

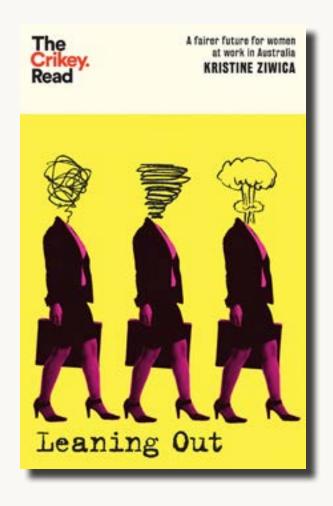
Australians and Australian women have lived through an incredible two and a half years of disruption – and change. The lessons we learn from this pandemic era and how we apply them to the ongoing project of gender equality and women's economic security could have profound implications for the future.

From my own misadventures in power posing, to the death of the #GirlBoss, from the home front to the work front (including daily skirmishes with persistent discrimination and a lack of workplace safety), we'll tackle it all in this small but mighty book, landing on what I hope will be a new deal for women at work in Australia. If we don't ask the big questions now, explore how we got here, and map out an alternative way forward, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past and, in the words attributed to Winston Churchill, 'wasting a crisis'.

We are at a crossroads. What can the world of work look like? Who can participate and on what terms? The pandemic has dramatically changed our ideas about what's possible, upending almost a decade of stasis when we looked at these issues through a narrow lens. From crisis comes change.

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