



**National
Urban League**

To Be Equal #12

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Facebook's COO Ignites Needed Conversation About Empowerment of Women

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"So please ask yourself: What would I do if I weren't afraid? And then go do it." Sheryl Sandberg

In a stroke of marketing genius befitting the Chief Operating Officer of the social media phenomenon, Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg chose Women's History Month to launch her new book, *Lean In*, and begin a national dialogue about "Women, Work and the Will to Lead." Ruth Standish Baldwin was a co-founder of the National Urban League more than a century ago and the inclusion and empowerment of women has been one of our most important priorities. Today, Former Labor Secretary Alexis Herman serves as Senior Vice Chair on our Board, and almost half of our 95 local Affiliate CEOs are women. For that reason, we applaud Ms. Sandberg for her new book and are proud to join in the conversation.

We all know that historic barriers of gender discrimination, as well as the responsibilities of bearing and caring for children have made it more difficult for women to balance work and family. But Sandberg contends that women too often "hold ourselves back in ways big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in." *Lean In* appears to be written by and for women for whom the path to executive leadership has always been a realistic, if somewhat difficult, journey. But the book has sparked another conversation in Black America about how women of color have always had to "lean in" to overcome the dual hurdles of racial and gender bias.

Consider how Harriet Tubman leaned into the face of death to lead a thousand slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Or how Sojourner Truth stood up and boldly asked "Ain't I a woman" at the 1851 Ohio Women's Rights Convention. Consider how Fannie Lou Hamer who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired," fought for African American voting rights as an organizer of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and Vice Chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Or how a quiet seamstress named Rosa Parks, leaned in, sat down on a bus and lit the fuse of the civil rights movement.

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Decrying the lack of women at the top of corporate America, Sandberg does admit that, "The gap is even worse for women of color, who hold just 4 percent of top corporate jobs, 3 percent of board seats and 5 percent of congressional seats." But, with rising numbers of black women in college, preparing themselves for successful careers, clearly a lack of drive or ambition is not the problem.

Lean In urges women to "Sit at the Table," "Seek and Speak Your Truth," "Don't Leave Before You Leave," and "Make Your Partner a Real Partner." These recommendations present a road map of success that has obviously worked for Sheryl Sandberg. But, it is largely the lack of support, the pressures of single parenthood, and systemic racial and gender discrimination that continue to keep women of color from getting a foot in the corporate door. The empowerment of all women depends on closing the wage gap, protecting women's reproductive rights, providing greater workplace flexibility, having more women in non-traditional professions like science and engineering, and supporting common sense measures like the Violence Against Women Act which was reauthorized and signed into law by President Obama last week.

If men and women lean in together, we can foster gender equity and a better America.

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