

'Lean in' messages can lower women's motivation to protest gender inequality

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Women in leadership are often told to "Lean In," designed to be motivational messaging demonstrating that they are more confident, strategic and resilient to setback. However, new research indicates that such "lean in" messaging can hinder women's motivation to protest gender equality.

Popularized in a book by American technology executive Sherly Sandberg, the "Lean In" solution to gender inequality advises women that demonstrating personal resilience and perseverance in the face of setbacks is key to career advancement.

Now, a new study led by the University of Exeter, Bath Spa University and the Australian National University has found that while such messages may provide inspiration for some, they can also reduce women's likelihood to protest gender discrimination. This effect could actually be hindering gender equality progress.

[Published](#) in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, the study involved four experiments, Researchers examined women's motivation to protest gender inequality after exposure to "Lean In" messages promoting individual resilience.

All the experiments were in the UK and involved more than 1,100 women who were either [undergraduate students](#) or employed women with university degrees. Women read about gender inequality, and then either read about resilience as key to promoting advancement (in line with "lean in" messaging), or participated in activities to build their own resilience by learning how to set flexible goals and maintain confidence.

The research found:

- In three of four experiments, women in "Lean In" conditions were less willing to be part of protest action over gender inequality compared to those in a control condition who were not exposed to "Lean In" messages.
- In two of the experiments, this effect occurred because women in "Lean In" conditions were less likely to believe that gender discrimination would affect their career prospects.
- In one, this effect occurred because women in "Lean In"

conditions also felt less angry about ongoing gender inequality.

Authors say the findings of this research highlight an unintended consequence of "Lean In" messages and related individual resilience training for women that is offered as a remedy for gender inequality in the workplace—that it can undermine women's recognition of, and willingness to protest about, the root causes of gender inequality: discrimination.

Lead author, Dr. Renata Bongiorno, who conducted the studies while at the University of Exeter and is now Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Bath Spa University, said, "The popularity of the 'Lean In' movement speaks to the challenges women continue to face due to gender discrimination in the workplace.

"Women are understandably looking for ways to advance their careers despite the disproportionate setbacks they continue to experience compared to men.

"While the 'Lean In' solution offered by Sheryl Sandberg can feel empowering, a lack of individual resilience or perseverance is not the cause of women's poorer career progress.

"The messages lead to women assuming that [gender discrimination](#) will be less of a barrier to their career advancement. This false belief is concerning for progress because it is reducing women's willingness to protest the real causes of gender inequality.

"Progress and gains for women have historically been achieved through collective [protest](#) over gender discriminatory practices and policies, including pregnancy discrimination, a lack of affordable childcare, and workplace sexual harassment.

"Finding ways to effectively challenge these ongoing barriers should be a focus for feminism because they are the real causes of [gender inequality](#) in career outcomes."

More information: Renata Bongiorno et al, Neoliberal Feminism and Women's Protest Motivation, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (2024).
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