The Edge: Systematic policies hold back women in workplace

Jarin Eisenberg
Women’s Business Center
June 2, 2014, 11:46 p.m. EST

There is a lot being said about women in the workplace lately. The ongoing debate about the wage gap, the confidence gap, and if we are “leaning in enough” seems to have taken over the gender/workplace debate.

With the exception of the wage gap in some aspects, a lot of the conversation has been centered upon individual characteristics that explain why women don’t reach top-level positions.

According to some, we don’t advocate enough for ourselves. We wait until we are experts in the field to decide we should be promoted, whereas men take on a position whether they are experts or not. According to Sheryl Sandberg, women have one foot out of the workplace before they even get started.

While all these pieces of advice hold some validity, they do not address systematic, structural barriers that women in all forms of employment face. Importantly, what is left out in most of these conversations is that much of what is being said is targeted to women of the dominant culture — white, middle-to-upper class, educated women — and not working-class minority
women who can lean in as far as they want, but still not reap the benefits Sandberg and others speak of.

This became more apparent when the news story of Jill Abramson being fired from her position as the executive editor of *The New York Times* broke. In the article, it is said that Abramson became aware she was earning considerably less in pay and benefits than her predecessor, Bill Keller. The article goes on to say that she approached management about this disparity (she leaned in) and was fired shortly after for being too “pushy” and was even said to be “difficult to work with.” While we should certainly take into consideration time spent on the job as a factor in the pay disparity referenced here, what we must address is what it means when even the most privileged women can’t break through the barriers of corporate culture.

It is always easier to explain inequalities by using individualistic explanations as the reason for such. However, when we focus on these characteristics, we overlook broader social, cultural and political patterns of inequality. Abramson is not the only woman to advocate for herself and get turned down or viewed as “pushy.” We can ban the word “bossy” and tell women to stop saying “sorry,” but we have to recognize that until women have access to top-level decision-making positions, we don’t stand a chance of changing the culture that is holding us back.

In her book, Sandberg was right when she brought up the idea of systematic policies that improved the workplace for women and put them on equal footing with their male counterparts. She discusses assigning mentors instead of waiting for them to find you, she mentions policies that require breakfast- or lunch-only meetings with mentors as to remove any uncomfortable perceptions about having dinner after work. These are all practical and tangible ways to improve the work culture.

When I think about my own career and my efforts to advance, I am certain about my level of competency, my dedication and my ability to take on new and demanding tasks. What I am unsure of is if I will have the opportunity to truly demonstrate those things to the individuals holding the power.

I have girlfriends who are taking on extra projects, clawing at the next step of their career, but just can’t seem to grab on. It is not for a lack of effort, and it certainly isn’t for a lack of confidence.

Instead of advising women in business to “lean in” or “stop saying sorry,” I think it is critical that we as a society take a step back and think about broad policies that better address structural issues. For example, many institutions have a longstanding precedent of being male-dominated — both in board makeup and senior-level positions. Business leaders should be cognizant of these biases and address them by developing women’s councils, ensuring that women have a seat at the table.
In doing so, institutions can build mentorship programs where women with years of experience and strong social networks mentor upcoming women to the quality of resources and capital that have been established in the business world.

Too often, we judge people for the decisions they make and the outcomes of those decisions without thinking about what options they had to choose from in the first place. However, by taking an individualistic approach to these issues, we miss out on the commonalities we share.

We fail to see our social position in relation to others. Once we see that, we will have a greater understanding of the barriers women face, an understanding that is much more reflective of the experiences women share in the workplace.

Jarin Eisenberg is a program coordinator for the Florida Tech Nathan M. Bisk College of Business. She received her master’s degree in sociology in 2009 from the University of South Florida.

Columnist series sponsored by the Women’s Business Center at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. For more information, visit http://wbc.fit.edu/.