

Regan Parker Glass Ceiling

Women: There Isn't a Glass Ceiling

Lately I've been hearing that I'm too much.

Sometimes, when the drumbeat of criticism continues long and loud, I take a step back. To get a break from feeling constantly criticized but also to see how things would be different if I were dimmer. How would a situation change? Who would step in or step up? Am I not seeing something because of my presence that needs to be seen. I go quiet and small and dim. It can sometimes be exhausting to do anything else.

I am self aware enough to know that I am not perfect. That perhaps I am too much sometimes. But other times I also know that my presence would not be received the same way if I weren't a woman.

Haven't we gotten past this yet?

My career in tech and the corporate world started in the era of Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Mayer. The rise of powerful women was swift and we were told that if we all Leaned In, we too could reach the highest levels of success.

I followed that advice and asked for what I deserved, demanded a seat at the table, and constantly pushed to prove my value. In return, I was told no, I was told to sit down and step aside so someone else could take credit for my work. I was looked over as a new mom whose version of hands-on motherhood didn't fit with an image of a highly successful attorney with an expertise that was incredibly sought after. I was not given a job because of chatter that I was too aggressive, told after meetings to be nicer and to apologize more.

To win in a game designed by the patriarchy, we have been told to play as men would. But when we do, we are pushed down, not liked, told we are too much. But the exact things that you don't like about us, that you criticize us for - are the exact things that will help us win and allow us to make real change. So we are faced with an impossible choice: being liked and accepted or winning.

It turns out that while we want women to break the glass ceiling, we only want her to do it in the way that society thinks is acceptable for a woman or in a way that makes men comfortable.

Some women have managed to reach the top levels of success, which is inspiring. But what that tells those of us who haven't is that we aren't pushing hard enough or aren't doing something right.

If what we were told should work, did, in fact work (lean in, be more masculine, ask for what you deserve), then the numbers would be vastly different from what they are today. Women would be thriving and heading up companies and schools and hospitals and venture capital firms in record numbers. Women's sports would reach parity - both in pay and viewership - to men's.

The pay gap would be gone. But those things have largely remained the same for generations. Everything that we've been told to do to break the glass ceiling has barely moved the needle. We keep getting told to push, to lean in, to play the game. But are we any better off than we were? Has anything actually changed?

And if it hasn't, how long do we wait? How many times do we have to bang our heads against the glass ceiling before it breaks? Or before it breaks us?

Perhaps the glass ceiling is unbreakable.

Women are exhausted. And many are choosing to opt out of work and take on caregiver roles - a seeming return to what women were trying to escape. For so many who did enter the workforce and tried to blaze new trails...the conditions around working were difficult to tolerate. So while many women might love the actual work, the tradeoffs became too much. How do we participate in the workforce in a meaningful way when we still carry the vast majority of the caregiving responsibilities? How do we balance motherhood with the demands of a job that never envisioned a woman in the role? The sacrifice might have felt worth it if we were making progress, if we could see the struggle paying off, if we could see how we were blazing trails and making change. But progress has been illusory.

I had hoped that we had broken through in the corporate world, but after reading an op-ed by Jessica Lessin about the disappearance of women in tech, I realized I might not be alone. This still exists everywhere- in tech, in sports, in the corporate world, and in politics.

After seeing the grotesque pay disparity of Caitlin Clark and her teammate's salaries at the WNBA compared to their male colleagues printed in the New York Times, I started to ask myself, is the glass ceiling really glass if it never breaks? The justification of the pay gap is that the WNBA doesn't make enough money because it doesn't have enough viewers to demand better ad dollars. But what talent will go to work, trying to balance work and family, trying to prove their value for so little money? It's a self-perpetuating cycle.

What if the glass ceiling was put there to make us think we can do it, but we never really could? It's not a glass ceiling. It's a cage. It is a construct built by the patriarchy designed to make sure women are never in power.

I keep thinking about Hillary Clinton losing the presidential election and standing in the Javitz Center, beneath a glass ceiling, expecting to have that moment where it was finally broken at the highest level in our country. And instead she was beaten by a misogynist who has bragged about groping women. Her supporters vastly underestimated how strongly the country wanted to keep traditional values in place.

As Michelle Obama said about Barak's presidency, perhaps our mere presence is a threat. Men own the game. We will never win playing it. We have to change it.

Throughout my career, I was often given a seat at the table. Because I'm good at what I do, and because I demanded it, and because I deserved to be there. But that table usually consisted of me and 20 white men.

The decision about whether we get a seat at the table or whether we get to achieve the top levels of business or politics still rests largely with men. They are the ones at the top, with the power and influence to make the decision, so we have to contort ourselves to convince men that we deserve to break through. It continues to be male centered.

The goal posts are constantly being moved. Women don't make as much because they didn't ask or don't negotiate harder. So we ask. We negotiate. And we get told no. So we bring data and information and results. And the goal posts move again. And I know this rings true not just for women, but for all of us who have faced discrimination whether for our gender, our race, where we come from, our beliefs or simply our willingness to be different.

Perhaps we don't really want to see women at the top. Because my god, what would women in power do? I can tell you what we would not do. We would not be in the bathroom crying after yet another failed attempt to ask for equal pay. We would not live in constant fear of being fired because we have to balance motherhood and our job. We would not walk into a room and be the only woman at the table. We would not punish women for taking time off to raise children or care for parents or partners. We would not allow exploitation - of people, of resources, or of the earth - all in the name solely of profit.

So what are we afraid of? When women do break through - and trust me, we will - will we be vengeful? Will we be so filled with rage and anger and frustration that we lash out? Maybe. I would hope that we would accept the moment with grace and gratitude. But there might be a smirk. A knowing glance. There might be a reckoning.

I can assure you that for most women who have been fighting this battle, we are angry. But mostly we are tired. We don't want to continue to have to fight our way through to the top. We'd just like to be there. To be an equal. Not to punish, not to inflict upon men what has been inflicted upon us. Not to turn men into property, force them into marriage, take away their right to vote. We just want a seat at the table. And to not be the only one there. At the end of the day, we want to know that our value is defined not by external judgments about who we are and what we look like, but instead based on what we've done. We want to know that we are capable of anything.

“Hope is the possibility of change.”

We were never going to win playing a man's game. It was never ours to win. It is in redefining the system - dismantling the old outdated version - and building something new - that we will achieve success. There are three things we can do to change.

First, create change where you can. If you are in a position of power, create and back policies that support women. Show what it looks like to play the game differently. Use the examples at the Olympics this summer. Simone Biles clearly and confidently put her mental health first, showing the world how she cares for herself, the support network she has created to support her, and crushed it. Alyson Felix built a nursery for women at the games, so they didn't have to be far from their babies while competing. We don't have to pretend we aren't women, aren't mothers, aren't *human*....to win.

The second is to invite our men and boys in as allies. This change, this movement, it is not just for women. It is for men, too. It's for our boys to see their moms be powerful and successful without having to contort ourselves. It is for men to see a model for how to acknowledge pain and doubt, to see reverence for women. It is for the non-binary and transgender to see that *what* we are doesn't matter to our success as much as *who* we are.

I am raising two boys. They both share my last name and their fathers - because it was important to me that they knew that I was just as important as their dad. Over the years, I have talked with them openly about my struggles in the corporate world, about the pay disparities and the hurtful feedback. I have educated them about the history of where we've come from, especially when they ask me why at school there is such a focus on girl power. It's hard for them to relate - which I take as a good sign. But I often remind them that we still have not yet seen a woman president. *Not yet.*

When Hillary Clinton ran, I took my little boys with me to vote at our local fire station. I lifted my oldest son up, and he held the pen with me as we made a historic vote - connecting the lines on the ballot to vote for the first woman nominee of a major political party. And this election, we will once again go to the polls, and we will cast our vote together - because we know that America can do better. We all deserve better.

And lastly, support women. The patriarchy wants us to have to be perfect to get a shot. It wants us to fit into the box that it created for us about how to behave. It takes any misstep and uses it as a reason to keep us out. But how irreverent, how inspiring, to still stand up. The old system benefits from keeping us small.

What is more powerful than a woman who is strong, who owns her mistakes, her rough edges. Who loves all of herself. And who stands up to say - I am here. I am here for me and I am here for you. Seeing that act of self love is what will inspire and make change. Not waiting for perfection.

The reality is that it isn't possible to break through without being fully who we are as women - bold, fierce, passionate, kind. But until we are willing to embrace difficult women, until we are able to cheer her on while she plays the game to win, we won't ever break free.

We want the victory, but not the messiness of getting there.

So women, and men...when you see us fighting and pushing and trying and being loud and bold and outspoken, it will feel uncomfortable. But what I ask is that you push past that discomfort. And see that we are doing that so we can make change. So we can set an example for our girls, and for our boys. So they can see a woman lead. They can see a woman be paid the same as men, so they can see a woman run a company and run the country.

I promise you, it will not be the woman who stays small who gets us there. This game wasn't designed for her.

And I also promise that when we arrive, when we know that this world has embraced us fully, and equally, leadership will change. It will change because we will bring with us the best of the

feminine - collaboration, support, wisdom, reverence for the earth and our children and for one another. We are all better off when we can see leadership that looks like us.

The world will change when we decide that the glass ceiling was never our responsibility to break.