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## Where are the female voices?

Sheryl Sandberg's book 'Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead' published in 2013 has become a bible for working women about how to further their careers. With credentials behind her such as an MBA from Harvard, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, and a Board member of The Walt Disney Corporation along with being a wife and mother, Sandberg offers pragmatic advice to women about how to lean into their careers at full tilt.

'Lean In' may be the most challenging book in terms of how women see themselves since 'The Female Eunuch' was released more than forty years ago. And like that book, men will find themselves needing to know what it says, because women in the workplace will start behaving differently as soon as they have read it. Sandberg is clear, that if women want a career then it is up to them to make it a reality and this sentiment aligns with our own Filling the Pool gender equity project.

Filling the Pool is a 2 year study which aims to examine why Perth performs worst out of all the Australian capitals in terms of female participation rates and gender pay gaps across the corporate sector.

Kicking off in June last year, we have secured majoring funding from Shell Australia with supporting funds provided by Worley Parsons, Westpac, EY and the Department of Local Government & Communities. Two key organisations active on the issue of gender equity have joined as project supporters – the Committee for Economic Development and the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Each organisation has one or more representatives on the project Steering Committee of which there is a gender balance.

Over the past few months Dr Terry Fitzsimmons and his colleague Prof. Victor Callan researchers from the University of Queensland have been conducting interviews with the men and women of Perth's corporate landscape to better understand why this city has such poor levels of female participation rates and why a pay gap of 26.4% exists.

The result of the research will become recommendations for the corporate sector as well as for women themselves. In June the Steering Committee will receive a report which will outline the findings of the interviews so it is too soon to guess what it may contain.

However back to Lean In, one piece of seemingly simplistic piece of advice from Sandberg to women is to 'sit at the table'. What I took this to mean is to be front and centre and make a contribution. Every day I come across situations where I can be the only woman in the room or if other females are present, I am the only one that speaks up.

With females making up 51% of the population, an almost deafening silence from more than half of the population is simply not good enough.

Here is a very recent example of what I mean. I spoke at a forum of business leaders and the audience was an equal spread of men and women, yet when the time came for discussion I only got questions from men. No doubt there were questions that the women wanted to ask yet for some reason they were reluctant to.

One way of getting around this suggests Sandberg, is for facilitators to be mindful that for every question asked by a man that they seek one from a woman. I used this technique, with great success, when chairing a conference, in that for every man, I asked a woman, for every young person, I asked someone older, I also actively encouraged questions from people of varying ethnicities and the discussion was all the richer for it.

So despite having much to offer in terms of perspective and differing opinions, without women sitting at the table and leaning in, their voices are not being heard and we are having too many lopsided conversations.

Perth's future is punctuated by as many opportunities as there are challenges and a diversity of opinion is needed to navigate our way through to what we hope is a bright future. However, we won't get there unless women are prepared to ask questions and voice their opinions. Women of Perth, I encourage you to lean in with gusto, it is important to Perth and its future.

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