The Saturday Essay
Sheryl Sandberg and Anna Maria Chávez on 'Bossy,' the Other B-word
Confident girls are often called the other B-word, and it can keep them from reaching their full potential, write Sheryl Sandberg and Anna Maria Chávez

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Sheryl Sandberg and Anna Maria Chávez say that confident girls who are often called 'bossy' can keep them from reaching their full leadership potential. The Facebook COO and Girls Scouts of the USA CEO tell WSJ's Joanne Po why their new 'Ban Bossy' campaign is a first step to leveling the playing field for women.

We were bossy little girls.

Sheryl: When my brother and sister describe our childhood, they will say that I never actually played as a child but instead just organized other kids' play. At my wedding, they stood up and introduced themselves by explaining, "Hi, we're Sheryl's younger brother and sister ... but we're not really her younger brother and sister. We're her first employees—employee No. 1 and employee No. 2."

From a very young age, I liked to organize—the toys in my room, neighborhood play sessions, clubs at school. When I was in junior high and running for class vice president, one of my teachers pulled my best friend aside to warn her not to follow my example: "Nobody likes a bossy girl," the teacher warned. "You should find a new friend who will be a better influence on you."

Anna: The Latino community of my childhood had clear expectations for each gender: Males made decisions, and females played supporting roles. My brothers and I used to play war with the neighborhood kids. Each child was assigned to a team to prepare for battle. As the only girl, I was always sent to collect ammunition (red berries from nearby trees). One day, I announced that I wanted to lead the battalion. The boys responded, "You are really bossy, Anna, and everyone knows a girl can't lead the troops."

Fortunately, I saw my mother break this mold by running for our local school board. One of the most vivid memories of my childhood was hearing people come up to my father and say that it was inappropriate for his wife to run for office … and having him tell them that he disagreed and was proud of her.

Although the two of us come from different backgrounds, we both heard the same put-down. Call it the other B-word. Whether it is said directly or implied, girls get the message: Don't be bossy. Don't raise your hand too much. Keep your voice down. Don't lead.
The word "bossy" has carried both a negative and a female connotation for more than a century. The first citation of "bossy" in the Oxford English Dictionary refers to an 1882 article in Harper's Magazine, which declared: "There was a lady manager who was dreadfully bossy." 100 years found that the use of "bossy" to describe women first peaked in the Depression-era 1930s, when popular sentiment held that a woman should not "steal" a job from a man, and reached its highest point in the mid-1970s as the women's movement ramped up and more women entered the workforce.

Most dictionary entries for "bossy" provide a sentence showing its proper use, and nearly all focus on women. Examples range from the Oxford Dictionaries' "bossy, meddling woman" to Urban Dictionary's "She is bossy, and probably has a pair down there to produce all the testosterone." Ngram shows that in 2008 (the most recent year available), the word appeared in books four times more often to refer to females than to males.

Behind the negative connotations lie deep-rooted stereotypes about gender. Boys are expected to be assertive, confident and opinionated, while girls should be kind, nurturing and compassionate. When a little boy takes charge in class or on the playground, nobody is surprised or offended. We expect him to lead. But when a little girl does the same, she is often criticized and disliked.

How are we supposed to level the playing field for girls and women if we discourage the very traits that get them there?

Social scientists have long studied how language affects society, and they find that even subtle messages can have a big impact on girls' goals and aspirations. Calling a girl "bossy" not only undermines her ability to see herself as a leader, but it also influences how others treat her. According to data collected by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, parents of seventh-graders place more importance on leadership for their sons than for their daughters. Other studies have determined that teachers interact with and call on boys more frequently and allow them to shout out answers more than girls.

It's no surprise that by middle school, girls are less interested in leading than boys are. Sixth- and seventh-grade girls rate being popular and well-liked as more important than being perceived as competent or independent, while boys are more likely to rate competence and independence as more important, according to a report by the American Association of University Women. A 2008 survey by the Girl Scouts of nearly 4,000 boys and girls found that girls between the ages of 8 and 17 avoid leadership roles for fear that they will be labeled "bossy" or disliked by their peers.

And "bossy" is just the beginning. As girls mature, the words may change, but their meaning and impact remain the same. Women who behave assertively are labeled "aggressive," "angry," "shrill" and "overly ambitious." Powerful and successful men are often well liked, but when women become powerful and successful, all of us—both men and women—tend to like them less.

Even our most successful and celebrated female leaders cannot rise above these insults. A foreign-policy adviser once described former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as "the bossy intrusive Englishwoman." Susan Rice, the U.S. national security adviser, was
described as having a "bossy demeanor" by a fellow diplomat, while Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor has been described as "difficult" and "nasty" by lawyers.

The phrase "too ambitious" is leveled at female leaders from Madeleine Albright to Hillary Clinton and perpetuates our most damning stereotypes. Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has a pillow in her California home that declares: "I'm not bossy. I just have better ideas."

This doesn't only affect women at the highest levels of power. Over the past year, I (Sheryl) have traveled around the world speaking about my book, "Lean In." From Beijing to Minneapolis, I have asked groups of men and women to raise their hands if they've been called "too aggressive" at work. Time and again, a small fraction of men raise their hands, while a great majority of women shoot a hand into the air...and sometimes two. At Howard University, I asked a group of female students if they had been called "bossy" during their childhoods. From within the sea of waving hands, one woman shouted, "During my childhood? How about last week!"

These stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies. Despite earning the majority of college degrees, women make up just 19% of the U.S. Congress, 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 10% of heads of state. Most leadership positions are held by men, so society continues to expect leadership to look and act male and to react negatively when women lead.

The irony, of course, is that so-called bossy women make great leaders. And we need great leaders. Our economic growth depends upon having women fully engaged in the workforce. Our companies perform better with more women in management. And our homes are happier when men and women share responsibilities more equally.

It's time to end the gendered speech that discourages girls from an early age. So the next time you hear a girl called "bossy," do what CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell advised: Smile, take a deep breath and say, "That girl's not bossy. She has executive leadership skills."

Ms. Sandberg is COO of Facebook and the founder of LeanIn.Org. Ms. Chávez is CEO of Girl Scouts of the USA. Ban Bossy, their new public service campaign to encourage leadership in girls, is at banbossy.com.