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## The Downfall and Discreditation of “Girlboss”: Feminism Viewed Through the Lens of Elizabeth Holmes’ Fraud

When Hulu’s documentary series chronicling the rise and fall of former Theranos CEO, Elizabeth Holmes, *The Dropout*, was released in 2022, social media flooded with jokes dubbing Holmes a “girlboss.” The term “girlboss” emerged in 2014 when former Nasty Gal CEO, Sophia Amoruso, published her autobiography, *#Girlboss* (Santos). The book, which defined a “girlboss” as “a woman whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world in which she swims upstream”(Amoruso), gave rise to the “girlboss feminism” that captivated women in the corporate world in the 2010’s. Being a “girlboss” was the key to achieving corporate acclaim. “Girlboss feminism” found its roots in Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and The Will to Lead*. Sandberg insisted that if women dismantled their own internalized sexism as opposed to dismantling the systemic sexism within the corporate world, they would easily climb the rungs of the corporate ladder(Williams 58). In the 2010’s, Sandberg’s novel and Amoruso’s concept of a “girlboss” controlled the feminist narrative, consequently aligning feminist achievement with corporate success. Elizabeth Holmes provides an example of an iconic “girlboss.” Holmes dropped out of Stanford University at nineteen years old to found her company (O’Brien), flourished within the male dominated Silicon Valley, and was named the world’s youngest self-made billionaire by Forbes at only 30 years old in 2014(Forbes). However, when a 2015 article in *The Wall Street Journal*, “*Hot Startup Theranos Has Struggled With Its Blood-Test Technology*,” by John Carreyrou exposed Holmes for defrauding investors and the public about the validity of Theranos’ technology,

Holmes, along with her title of “girlboss” lost their legitimacy. Today, “girlboss” has regressed to a slang term Gen Z uses to describe a woman who manipulates those around her for personal gain. Holmes embodies both definitions of “girlboss,” but despite today’s jokes about how Holmes “girlbossed” too well for her own good, one wonders how Holmes defrauded investors and business partners. The capitalist influence that *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, and #Girlboss inserted into the feminist narrative of the 2010’s empowered Holmes’ deception. Additionally, Holmes’ utilization of “girlboss feminism” plays a role in its regression from a term insinuating achievement to one embodying manipulation because by disregarding the advantageous role privilege played in her success in Silicon Valley, she highlighted “girlboss” feminism’s illegitimacy.

Sheryl Sandberg’s “lean in feminism’s” influence on Holmes reveals itself when, at the 2015 Forbes 30 Under 30 Summit, Holmes asked the crowd, ““What's the thing you love, and that you're so incredibly passionate about that if you got fired you'd still want to do it?””(Holmes quoted in Hedgecock). This question is reminiscent of the title of the first chapter in Sandberg’s book: “What Would You Do If You Weren’t Afraid?”(Sandberg 26). At the same summit, commenting on criticism Theranos received regarding their refusal to release details about their technology, Holmes stated, "The lab industry did a really good job of seeing doubt about us,"(Holmes quoted in Hedgecock). Holmes’ comment draws from “girlboss” feminism by sarcastically suggesting that doubts placed upon her are the product of the masculine bias permeating the business world. By dismissing doubt in her as sexist, Holmes employs “girlboss” feminism to solidify her credibility. Additionally, in the wake of backlash from John Carreyrou’s *Wall Street Journal* article, Holmes told *Bloomberg Businessweek*, “until what happened in the last four weeks, I didn’t understand what it means to be a woman in this space”(Bellstrom).

Holmes once again depicts the criticism she received as sexist. A study done on Holmes' speech patterns found that Holmes often used phrases that indicated women ought to hold positions of power as well as "evaluative adjectives(e.g., 'really, really critical'; 'impactful'; 'a cool thing to do'; 'not hard')"(Ho) in order to "disrupt the tradition of men dominating technology corporations"(Ho). These findings demonstrate how Holmes relied on "girlboss" feminism to highlight her narrative of a woman navigating a field that favors men. Holmes' utilization of "girlboss" feminist rhetoric in response to criticism dissuaded people from doubting her because Holmes implicitly labeled skepticism of her as sexist. Holmes also embodied "girlboss" feminism by portraying herself as ambitious and resilient. In 2015, Holmes stated, "You'll get knocked down over and over and over again, and you get back up, I've been knocked down a lot, and it became really clear that this was what I wanted to do, and I would start this company over 10,000 times if I had to'"(Holmes quoted in Hedgecock). Holmes' statement implies that given they possess enough determination, women can overcome obstacles in a system stacked against them. By accrediting her success to grit, Holmes demonstrates the role "girlboss" feminism played in convincing people she was a capable businesswoman.

Holmes' attributing her accomplishments to her resilience stems from a position of privilege. In Professor Martin Kenney's book, *Understanding Silicon Valley: The Anatomy of an Entrepreneurial Region*, he states that Holmes' alma mater, Stanford University, "feeds the firms of the Valley"(8). This analysis of the culture at Stanford showcases how attending an elite institution advantaged Holmes in accessing Silicon Valley. Kenny also remarks that Stanford "encourages their faculty to take what they know and start companies"(8). This remark explains how Holmes' connections at Stanford assisted her in founding Theranos, as she initially pitched the idea for the company to her chemical engineering professor who later served as Theranos'

first board member(Auletta). Holmes also capitalized on the notoriety of Silicon Valley, as exemplified by Jant Ho's study, "Purposeful life or sugar-coated lies: How Elizabeth Holmes legitimised her fraud"'s findings, that "Holmes often constructed an intertextual link to the legacy of Silicon Valley"(Ho). Ho also remarked that "Holmes not only symbolised Silicon Valley as innovative and successful but also used it to implicitly represent her company as pioneering and praiseworthy"(Ho). These findings demonstrate how Holmes used her privilege to perpetrate her fraud. In addition to the academic privilege that afforded Holmes access to a job opportunity, Holmes' identity as a white woman benefited her in the workforce. In an article for *The New York Times*, "Return to Office? Some Women of Color Aren't Ready,"

Laura Morgan Roberts, a professor at the University of Virginia stated, "[women of color have] historically worked in environments that have not been physically safe for them, much less psychologically or emotionally safe" leading them to often feel "disconnected or disengaged at work"(Tulshyan). Despite facing criticism during her tenure as Theranos' CEO, Holmes never experienced threats to her safety in her work environment, and her advice to "get back up" after being consistently "knocked down" disregards that unsafe work environments burden women of color with burnout. Holmes' advice also utilizes "girlboss" feminist rhetoric regarding resilience to portray herself as strong while ignoring the fact that women of color are systematically disadvantaged. When describing her personal navigation of the corporate workforce, the fact that Holmes highlights resilience as the key to surmounting obstacles displays her neglect of the privilege that allows her to "get back up" so easily. A study done of 617 female scientists by *The Harvard Business Review* found that women in STEM often experience a form of bias where colleagues question their expertise (Williams). However, the fact that the study also discovered that "Black women were considerably more likely than other

women to report having to deal with this type of bias; three-fourths of Black women did,”(Williams) demonstrates how, as a white woman, Elizabeth Holmes possessed an advantage in making strides in the scientific field.

Holmes’ neglect to acknowledge privilege while she voices “girlboss” feminist rhetoric reveals that “girlboss” feminism is contingent on the privilege of the women who subscribe to it. The origins of “girlboss” feminism display how it is a form of feminism that is inherently exclusionary of women of color. Sheryl Sandberg’s book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and The Will to Lead* was initially lauded, as exemplified by a 2013 *The New York Times* review by Anne-Marie Slaughter stating, “*Lean In;*” is full of many gems and slogans that ambitious women would do well to pin up on their wall”(Slaughter). Slaughter’s review highlights the “girlboss” feminist sentiment that ambition is integral to a woman’s success. A 2014 review in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* by James Blasingame describing Sandberg’s book as “powerful”(421) and “an amazing work”(422), also suggests the masculine acceptance of “girlboss” feminism. However, critiques of Sandberg’s book corroborate the idea that “lean in” and “girlboss” feminism disregard intersectionality. In Christine Williams’ 2014 review, titled “The Happy Marriage of Capitalism and Feminism,” Williams’ description of the book as “hopelessly class biased”(58) implies that Sandberg ignores how wealthy white women such as herself and Holmes, who attended elite universities (Harvard Business School and Stanford University, respectively,) are seemingly more inclined to a seat at the table than less privileged women of color. Williams writes that Sandberg’s advice

boils down to three points: she encourages women to seek out and pursue all opportunities for career development (‘sit at the table’). To demand that their husbands take equal responsibility for housework and childcare(‘make your partner a real partner’),

and to minimize any disruption of their careers posed by maternity and motherhood ('don't leave before you leave'). (Williams, 58)

A study published in the *Handbook of Social Work Practice with Vulnerable and Resilient Populations* contextualizes Sandberg's and reveals Sandberg's exclusion of women less privileged than herself advice with their findings: "45 percent of Black, 25 percent of Hispanic, and 22 percent of all Native American families were female-headed households with no spouse present. In contrast, households headed by women made up about 16 percent of white families"(Lewis 563). These statistics demonstrate how women of color are far less able than white women to "demand that their husbands take equal responsibility for housework and childcare"(Williams 58) and "minimize any disruption of their careers posed by maternity and motherhood"(Williams 58), practices Sandberg suggests are essential to women's success in the corporate world. Sandberg's advice for women in business minimizes the struggles of women of color. The fact that Sandberg's advice served as the crux for feminist rhetoric in the 2010s means that the "girlboss" feminism rooted in Sandberg's words encouraged white women to uphold their privilege by negating the hardships of women of color.

Elizabeth Holmes entered the corporate world by the hand of multiple forms of privilege and adopted the persona of a "girlboss" not only to climb the corporate ladder, but to defraud Theranos investors, employees, and patients. Holmes spewed "girlboss" rhetoric popularized by Sheryl Sandberg and Sophia Amoruso in order to dismiss doubt cast upon her as sexist. Holmes portrayed herself as a woman determined to gain success in Silicon Valley despite facing the challenges of working in a male dominated field. However, the image Holmes created of herself relied on ignoring the privilege she was born with. Holmes' strategic aversion to acknowledging her privilege stemmed from "girlboss" feminism's origin as an inherently racist and classist form

of feminism. Similar to how Holmes' victims eventually gained insight to her fraud and dismissed her as an imposter, today, many American feminists have reduced the term "girlboss" to one of irony upon realizing "girlboss" feminism's innate flaw. "Girlboss" feminism was founded on advice that pitted women against each other, in turn derailing feminist progress as opposed to advancing it. In 1982, author and activist bell hooks wrote:

from a Black female perspective, if white women are denying the existence of Black women, writing 'feminist' scholarship as if Black women are not part of the collective group of American women, or discriminating against Black women, then it matters less that North America was colonised by white patriarchal men who institutionalised a radically imperialistic social order, than that white women who purport to be feminists support and actively perpetuate anti-Black racism.(Amos)

Viewing "girlboss" feminism through the lens of hooks' writing reveals that "girlboss" feminism cannot be a true form of feminism, as it relies on proclaimed feminist "girlbosses" pushing narratives that disregard their privilege and consequently the systemic oppression experienced by women of color. Additionally, in hooks' 1984 book, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, she states "as long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be achieved"(hooks, page unknown). This quote encapsulates how the "girlboss" feminism perpetrated by white women such as Sheryl Sandberg, Sophia Amoruso, and Elizabeth Holmes derails the goal of "feminist sisterhood," and in turn prevents any means of dismantling patriarchal systems. The fact that hooks wrote her essays on feminism prior to the emergence of "girlboss" feminism demonstrates the willingness of white feminists to prioritize their personal gain over women of color's experiences and safety. Although today, "girlboss" feminism has been largely discredited, the question remains: are white feminists willing to

relinquish their societal privilege, or will the tenets of “girlboss” feminism simply manifest under different pretenses in order to uphold the purported superiority of white women?



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