

Take Britain, for instance, where the [move towards universal credit](#) in the benefits system should set off loud alarm bells for contemporary feminists. The move will reverse one of the tenets of the 1975 Child Benefit Act, which stipulated that child benefit was to be paid to the mother. Instead, universal credit provides one payment to a nominated member of a couple, which includes their child benefit. This might sound like an administrative quibble, but it's desperately important: women's financial independence was the reasoning behind the original setup. Forcing women in poverty to relinquish financial independence and have government payments potentially paid only to their partner presents a huge risk for women experiencing domestic and financial abuse.

Link this with the repellent rape clause in the 2015 summer budget, which SNP MP Alison Thewliss is [valiantly fighting](#). The clause states that child benefit will only be paid for the first two children a woman has. For any other children, she can only claim the benefit if she can prove she conceived as the result of a rape. This is a war on the reproductive rights of poorer women. In an ideal world, no one would need child benefit because work would pay, and we'd have an economy that didn't trap so many people in jobs that pay subsistence wages, if work is available at all. It seems that starting a family is a luxury to be denied to the majority of people needing a little help to ease the financial burden of having children who will prop up the economy in future decades.

After the financial crash, some mused that a more equal society might emerge from the wreckage; that the reckless behaviour and machismo that caused the crisis would lead to a meditative process that changed and improved society. In fact, the opposite happened. Austerity gave us a colder, harder society. And as ever, when cuts bite, it isn't upper-middle class, wealthy white men who suffer, it's women – especially poor, black, or disabled women.

But the rise of individual women in business and elite institutions must herald a sea change, surely? At Davos this year, there were a few high-

profile women speaking, Sandberg included. But if her individualist feminism doesn't rattle cages, it's worth examining why. High-profile women in business are still a rarity, and as Sandberg points out in her book [Lean In](#), she got there, as did many of her female peers, by aping the behaviour and careers of high-profile men. Rather than change the system, they've colluded with it, and propped it up by appealing to others to do so, suggesting that this is possible for all women.

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This is the problem with rhetoric that relies on "aspiration". It's an individualist idea that places both praise and blame with the individual, while abdicating societal structures of responsibility. Less affluent women who fail to secure high-paid jobs "didn't want it enough" or chose to jeopardise their job prospects by asking for flexible working hours for childcare reasons. Outliers like Sandberg, rather than acting as a totem of feminist progress, should alert us to how unchanged these institutions are.

You don't shake up an institution by keeping your head down and assimilating. Leaning in only helps individuals, with no wider advances to society. Withdrawing complicity, protesting and arguing that institutions that promote men, and governments that deliberately oppress and impoverish women are rotten and should change themselves to achieve gender parity, makes more sense for women, collectively. If the system is broken, break it down, don't force yourself into the cracks.

Individuals chipping away at the top benefit themselves more than they help women as a group. Activists such as [Sisters Uncut](#), [Focus E15](#), and numerous female-led [bedroom tax](#) campaigns across the country already accept that solidarity among women and refusal to engage with the status quo is a much more powerful tool in feminism's fight. Why rely on one or two women smashing the glass ceiling when women at the bottom still have nothing?