

The decline of the girlboss

by Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

- 1 A few months after graduating, mid-recession, on to the dole and shortly before I started writing for *The Guardian*, I worked very briefly for an online magazine as an editorial assistant. It was on my first day there that my older, female boss taught me a lesson I have never forgotten. After running through my various duties, she added this advice: “The men upstairs,” she said, “are going to think you are their secretary. They are going to ask you to do their photocopying and answer their phones. And it is very important that when they do, you say the following phrase: ‘No, that’s not my job.’”
- 2 I’ve been thinking about this because Anne Dickson’s *A Woman in Your Own Right*, the classic assertiveness bible first published in 1982, is being rereleased next month. My mother first gave me a copy when I was a teenager and, having worked with women’s groups in the 1980s, schooled me in assertiveness and self-defence at a time when “girlboss” culture was barely a glint in Margaret Thatcher’s eye.
- 3 Girlboss culture is the latest incarnation of the assertiveness and empowerment guides of the 1980s. A girlboss, for those who don’t know, is a 21st-century working woman “whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world in which she swims upstream” (this, according to the businesswoman and *#Girlboss* author Sophia Amoruso). The girlboss is essentially a power-suited working girl for the Instagram era, a pinkwashed hypercapitalist career queen who “leans in”.
- 4 She is reportedly on her way out, and not before time. Her place in fourth wave feminism has been mired by controversy: on the one hand, she has been accused of rebranding personal power and success as a quest for equality while doing nothing to challenge structural inequalities; on the other, she has at times served as a powerful archetype for women of colour, in terms of achieving success in areas dominated by white men.
- 5 All of which begs the question, do we really need assertiveness training these days, when everywhere you look women are loudly professing how empowered and confident they are? If we are smashing glass ceilings, are we really likely to cave in to pressure from our family to not order the jalfrezi for fear it will be too spicy, as one scenario in *A Woman in Your Own Right* plays out? Dickson argues that awareness and action are not the same thing. “It is easier to recognise

inequality, to be aware of it, than it is to know how to change our behaviour,” she tells me. “We simply don’t know how to alter our speech or approach, so again the skills in this book are essential for personal change.”

- 6 She also notes that, despite huge advances, sexism hasn’t gone away, “just underground”, and that women are still struggling to assert themselves equally because “we have many inner attitudes to overcome” including “a dependence on outside approval, uncertainty about how to express a difference of opinion or to ask someone to change their behaviour”.
- 7 This focus on women’s behaviour has made assertiveness training a precursor to what Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad call “confidence culture”. Confidence culture, as Gill and Orgad explain in their new book of the same title, posits that “women suffer from an internal ‘defect’, namely a ‘confidence gap’, which holds them back in the world of work”. A woman’s job, indeed her labour, is to remedy that, often at the expense of challenging the unequal sexist and racist structures that obstruct women’s careers. Books such as Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* exemplify this “cult”, which encourages women to internalise the problem of inequality as individualised. In other words, you work on changing yourself within the existing capitalist, corporate reality, rather than trying to transform that reality. Realising this, well-meaning slogans about a woman’s need to “stop apologising” or “never ask permission” 32.
- 8 None of this is to say that we should never work on ourselves. I have found the power of no very useful in my career. Nevertheless, the feminist imperative of the 1980s towards assertiveness has in the intervening decades morphed into a culture that prizes confidence as meme, as marketing tactic, and as a distraction from fighting for real political change. *A Woman in Her Own Right* and similar philosophies focused on language and behaviour as a way of helping women feel better equipped to survive in sexist environments. Today’s confidence culture expects a woman to remake her whole self.
- 9 Far from being liberating, it all seems like a lot of, well, work. Which is why I suspect that you might be better off with *A Woman in Your Own Right* than any of the modern girlboss manuals that claim to be able to transform you wholesale into a kickass corporate woman. How much more are we expected to work on ourselves? Perhaps it’s time to turn to these girlbosses and tell them: “No, that’s not my job.”

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