

INFLUENCERS & CREATORS

The Girl Boss Has Been Canceled. Here's What We Can Learn From Her

The rise and fall of the movement is the perfect corporate cautionary tale



'Girl boss' culture is no longer compatible with society's ever-changing definition of feminism. Adweek; Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images



By **Emmy Liederman**

MARCH 21, 2022

The "girl boss" movement, an exclusive empire that has allowed outdated and exclusionary feminism to flourish into the 21st century, has officially reached its expiration date.

Famously coined in 2014 by author and businesswoman Sophia Amoruso, girl boss culture has undergone a complete memeification by virtue of TikTok users, who pair the phrase with words like "gatekeep" and "gaslight" to underscore its damaging effects. According to Amoruso in her book #Girldboss, the term embodies an aspirational woman who is "in charge of her own life." The movement, which rejected the misogynistic belief that women in power are overbearing or bossy, has branded feminism as an individual's endeavor as opposed to a group effort.

While the movement served a purpose for some women during its early days, the state of inclusion in 2022 looks a lot different than it did in 2014, and continuing to use the phrase is incompatible with society's ever-changing definition of feminism. While the girl boss movement has been mocked and discredited, the valuable lessons that can be drawn from its rise and fall make for the perfect corporate cautionary tale.

white supremacy. Similarly, dismantling the girl boss isn't just about poking fun at women who feel empowered by the phrase—its demise comes from a concerted effort on the part of activists to popularize intersectional feminism and a healthier work-life balance.

After years of convincing women that sharing success is a threat to their own professional growth, the girl boss movement has led generations of working professionals to internalize challenges they face as reflections of their own capabilities, work ethic and competence. Critics argue that the movement isolated women of color by refusing to acknowledge racial barriers to entry, flipped blame on employees instead of the broken systems they served and convinced women that achievement is a byproduct of relentless selfishness.

"Early on in my career in marketing, the girl boss movement instilled in me that if I wasn't the first one in and the last one out, that would be a negative reflection of my work ethic," said Sam Richards, managing partner at consulting firm Spirited Media. Richards stressed that those who have the bandwidth to work tirelessly during all hours of the day also often don't have outside stress and responsibilities that tend to fall to women, such as household chores and child care.

Amiah Sheppard, community partnership manager at Zenith Insurance Company and founder of Sheppard Consulting Group, spent her college career attending conferences celebrating the girl boss. She said she was usually the only Black woman in the room.

"The whole movement really didn't include me or women like me," added Michele Thornton Ghee, CEO of Ebony and Jet and a member of Adcolor's board of directors. "Racial inclusion was never a part of the conversation."



Blame the system, not yourself

Sheryl Sandberg, who has served as chief operating officer at Meta since 2008, famously advised women to make strides in their professional lives by "leaning in" with confidence and being more assertive at work. This school of thought operates under the assumption that the only thing making a man more successful than a woman in the workplace is his abundance of audacity.

corporate world, it was because they weren't good enough. This rationale disregarded the lack of an equal playing field, as women often carry more responsibilities outside of work than men, while also glorifying hustle culture.

"Getting up at 4 a.m. and working until midnight is not a badge of honor," said Katie Keating, co-founder and co-chief creative officer at women-focused agency Fancy. "The girl boss was about bragging rights, and it just transfers all of this guilt. The whole call to perfection has really hurt women."

It honestly feels like we are back here again.

When are we going to learn that there is nothing inclusive about a group of (predominantly white) girl-boss power-bitches dressed in power-suits claiming feminism as their own exclusive club? pic.twitter.com/YjsPzliAM

— Nina Funnell, journalist & #LetUsSpeak manager (@ninafunnell) **March 7, 2022**

Give up the gatekeeping

Gatekeeping, which refers to people limiting or hindering the success of their peers in an effort to advance themselves, is a key component of the girl boss starter kit. It demonstrates the degree to which the movement's mentality is incompatible with meaningful progress, as it only furthers the gap between privileged and marginalized employees.

To create more equal opportunity for women in the workplace, those who have made it to a position of power must commit to breaking down the barriers to entry that they regrettably faced, according to Annette Sally, vice president of Atlanta-based agency Blue Sky.

"We are in a moment where there is an opportunity to be generous for the ones coming [up] after us," said Sally, rebuking the popular "you have to earn it" attitude. "What a gift if all the ones coming after us can get there and do it easier than we did."

Who's That Girl?

TikTok's "That Girl" trend, which is now spreading across For You pages, consists of compilations of women attempting to mirror "that girl" who gets a lot of attention by vying to become thinner, more organized and more productive. According to Richards of Spirited Media, That Girl is 2022's iteration of the girl boss, by once again pitting women against each other to accomplish what media portrays as important: early mornings, green smoothies, productivity and thin physiques. These cultural moments are often criticized for being highly populated by white users, who turn a seemingly empowering concept into a tone-deaf and exclusionary movement.

Richards echoed this sentiment, stressing the importance of clearing more accessible paths for her successors.

"I work with younger women, and all I want them to do is run past me with success," she said. "That is what we should be looking for: setting up women to be more successful than us and to have an easier time getting there."

Move from talking to doing

Many opponents of the girl boss movement object to its outdated tendency to tout inclusion, as they believe it should be an expectation rather than a cause for celebration.

When Thornton Ghee moved into her role as CEO at Ebony and Jet, the conversations she had with her predecessors were about "servant leadership" and "showing up fully," as opposed to fixating on her identity. By qualifying "boss" with the word "girl," critics believe, the movement reinforces that gender inherently qualifies success. "It was never about how I was a woman, and it was never about my race," Thornton Ghee said.

Susie Nam, CEO of Droga5, Americas, and an Adcolor board member, offers a word of advice for those paving the way for the next chapter of corporate feminism: embrace complexity. "Everyone is multi-hyphenated now," said Nam. "I'm Korean. I'm American. Yes, I'm a CEO, but I'm also a mother and a wife. The full humanity of a person is what needs to be embraced."

Among the sea of girl boss-themed mugs and apparel was an advertising movement that was once seen as the gold standard in the marketing world: Always' "Like a Girl" campaign, unveiled in 2014. Angela Rodriguez, svp and head of strategy at multicultural agency Alma, said the spot, which highlighted young girls' definition of doing things "like a girl" and was seen as revolutionary at the time, doesn't pack the same punch for

"It's very different for people who grew up understanding pronouns to think about what it means to be 'like a girl' than it is for women one generation back," she said. "We need new language around what women in leadership looks like."



This story first appeared in the March 21, 2022, issue of Adweek magazine.



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