

EPISODE 1696

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FT: So Money episode 1696, lean in and other myths of making it at work.

“SM: It's not the ambition that's a bad thing, right? It's a recognition of what is possible, given what you have access to and while also then trying to make good on your ambitions, right? Because what is a world without our ambition? That is not an exciting place. I do not want to live in a society that is not fueled by women's ambitions. And I think that the pushback and the way that like ambition is becoming a dirty word for women is part of the feminist backlash. It is a effort to, say, putting women back in their place and saying, 'Well, we should have never let you become an astronaut. We should have never let you in the boardroom. We should have never let you do all of these things.' And I don't think that's the solution.”

[INTRO]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. If you have seen Greta Gerwig's Barbie, you know the famous monologue that was delivered by Gloria, played by America Ferrera, where she describes the impossible expectations and standards placed on modern women. She says, “It is literally impossible to be a woman. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. Yes, basically, do the impossible.”

Today, we're examining how challenging it is for women to fulfill their ambition in the workplace, at least not in the way we've been told we could, right? Lean in, be a girl boss. I myself, I was told, “Go to college. Go to grad school. Work hard. Ask for the raise. You'll absolutely earn your value. You'll absolutely then get promoted and earn the respect of your colleagues.” But we

know that's not actually the case, and it's much harder for women to achieve this than anybody else, well, because the workplace was not designed for us, still not.

Our guest today, Samita Mukhopadhyay, has had a personal reckoning with her own definition of success in the workplace. She's the former Executive Editor of Teen Vogue and Feministing and the current Editorial Director at The Meteor. In her new book, *The Myth of Making It*, Samita traces the origins of these myths. She wants to know, how did we get here? How did workplace feminism sell us a false bill of goods, and what can we do about it? We is the operative word. Our ability to find success at work is a collective effort.

In our conversation, we talk about how we're conditioned to understand success, how the push for women in the workforce has created more racial and socioeconomic divides. We touch on the tradwife movement and how it reflects in some ways a backlash to the feminist movement. Here's Samita Mukhopadhyay.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Samita Mukhopadhyay, welcome to So Money. I am really enjoying your book, and I know our audience will, too. It's called *The Myth of Making It: A Workplace Reckoning*. Congrats and welcome.

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SM: Thank you. It's so good to be here. I'm a fan.

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FT: Oh, likewise. Oh, we're going to get into it. Just off the bat, you want to make clear and I want to make clear, too, that your book is not a self-help guide. That would actually be very sort of meta because your whole book is about how what has gotten us into a bit of a pickle with the definition of success and the pursuit of success as a woman in the workplace is that it has

become very individualistic. We have forgotten the importance of the movement and how we need to work as a collective and how there are many stakeholders in this. It's not just certain women.

This is really a reckoning. It's a manifesto. It's part memoir. Maybe we could start with the memoir part and how you arrived at this reckoning yourself. The pandemic, I read, was a bit of a turning point for you. What happened? What exactly was – I don't think it was a moment, but it was probably a lead-up to that.

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SM: Yes, absolutely. The years leading up to the pandemic, I had had a series of just disappointments. I lost my job. My father was sick, and he passed away right before the pandemic. I was increasingly unhappy in my job. I had this dream job. I was the number two at Teen Vogue. With that came all of the excitement of working in a glossy publication. I should have been – I was living the dream, right? I mean, I had worked my way up to this job, but I couldn't help but feel something was missing.

It really wasn't until the pandemic that I had the space to reflect and also the glitz and glamour of a job like a fashion magazine editor go to the wayside when you can't leave your house. All of a sudden, my fancy studio apartment in a luxury building became a COVID chamber. I just – a lot of the things that are exciting about that life fell to the wayside. Obviously, there was no fashion week. There was no events in the evenings. There was no restaurants. It was just me and a grumpy staff on Zoom.

It just made me think about what does make you happy at work, right? What is actually – what was I really doing? It gave me the space to be like, “I don't know that this is actually what's bringing me joy.” I don't necessarily know that it was the job's fault, as much as it was a series of things that had happened in my career and in my life that I didn't really have space to deal with. That's what came out as a reckoning where rather than say like – I think when I had lost my job, I suffered some serious mental health distress. I think that if I had ascribed to a different narrative, I would have been like, “I need space to gather myself, figure out what I want to do next, really think about who I am and what I want.”

Instead, I was like, “Hustle, hustle, hustle. I need to get to the next opportunity. I'm going to be stressed out,” and then the real material considerations of having to find a new job. I just jumped right in, and I felt like it was very much I was faking it until I made it. Yes, that was where I started to really reflect on it and then talking to other women in my life who were just so successful on paper, had these incredible careers that were just like, “Yes, I actually don't want to work all the time. It does not make me happy to constantly feel like I have to hustle, hustle, hustle. And even with all of that, I still can't buy a house, still haven't paid off my student debt.” That I think women really started to question this false bill of goods that we have been sold that if you personally work as hard as possible, you will get everything you want. I think that's where I start.

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FT: I mean, not that money is everything, but it can't hurt. It would have helped if you had been reaching this level of exhaustion. But at least you could look at the bank account and go, “Well, I can pay for what I need and then some.” Again, not to justify money as the end-all solution but –

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SM: Yes. We are told often as women that this is part of the sacrifice of getting there, right? You may be paid less. But once you prove yourself, you'll make it and you will get that payday and whether that's financial or resource, spiritual, if it's your job title, whatever that might be. Consistently, I think women are finding and especially mothers, right? Especially women that have things that happen in their life that take them off the upward trajectory, traditional upward trajectory, we really internalized this idea that we didn't work hard enough, right? Or we weren't competitive enough, and that's why we didn't get there. Yes.

I think that it's funny because people are like, “Well, money doesn't make you happy, and you can't just work for money.” But I don't – there's not really many people in my life that aren't working for money. Money may not make you happy. But if you don't have it, it'll really make you unhappy, so it's not – I think what I was really trying to get at is this idea that work is a hobby for

women. It is not a hobby. Almost every woman in my life has material considerations, and they are working because they need to earn money. They're not working because it's a hobby.

That's what I felt like was so wrong with so much advice for women and work is it was assuming that when you feel like finally going out and getting a job, and it's like most women have to get a job. I don't really know a lot of women that can just not work.

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FT: Right. I think increasingly on the flip side of that, women who work from home and aren't earning a paycheck, there is also a misconception. It's a perception that, well, that's a luxury because that's somehow not as hard as getting up in the morning, putting on clothes, and going to work in a job, in an office. But the labor at home is of equal measure, if not sometimes harder than sitting in front of your computer and dealing with an annoying boss.

What I love about your book is that you front it with these important moments in history that have moved the movement in ebbs and flows around feminism and the contributions of the feminist movement to where we are today in terms of the narrative and the paradigm around what it means to be “successful” and ambitious in the workplace. Can you share some of these inflection points throughout the feminist history that we have maybe going back to maybe the sixties perhaps, as that's when things really took off?

But how it almost like – it was sometimes – the movement was sometimes working in our favor. Sometimes, it wasn't. It was creating division as well within women, whether you had – it was a racial divide, socioeconomic divide. It's very complex, and it's important context to explain why you might show up today and be like, “Is this it? I'm not happy.”

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SM: Yes. I was really fascinated. I mean, I think in general, my style of writing is I always – I'm like, “Okay, who said this first?” Or, “Where is this coming from?” Or, “What is this the evolution of?” I was really interested in the idea of having it all and the way that so much of how we talk about women in the workplace and mothers in the workplace was this really untenable frame

that we all know isn't real and isn't something we can actually do. But we still all have it in the back of our heads of like, "I can have it all. I can have it all."

I really wanted to look at what were the roots of that. I found the work of Helen Gurley Brown who was the longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She wrote a book called *Having It All* in the early eighties. But prior to that, she had written this book called *Sex and the Single Girl* and had really made a name for herself as almost a scandalous writer about how single young women should feel comfortable having sex and having jobs and having an independence, which you would think is feminist, right?

A lot of the feminists at the time were – they felt that her work was a little bit too pro-sex on men's terms, and it didn't – it was pop culture feminism. You see similar debates today, right? What I saw happen was that going back, my understanding of feminism had always been Betty for Dan, right? It was this kind of the feminine mystique, the problem that has no name. Women are miserable at home, and so they should get out of their home because baking cookies is not your life's work and get a job.

Somehow, that forced the narrative around workplace feminism to being something that women do frivolously, that something that they have a yearning. They believe that they are made for something bigger than being a housewife, and so they go out into the workforce. Gurley Brown was really speaking to women that had to work either way, right? She was speaking to admin assistants, secretaries, pink-collar workers, single city gals who had to work either way. They didn't have husbands. They didn't have – for then, it was really talking to more college-educated women.

I think you see that today in terms of how we talk about feminism and the workplace. Even when we look at lean in, right? You think about how – I mean, if Sheryl Sandberg doesn't have it all, I don't know what else she could need. But she has everything that any modern woman would ever need to be successful in their career and as a parent, right? But there is in elitism to how, and she was criticized quite a bit for this. But this assumption that you can have it all because not having it all is an option.

I think what a lot of women have now learned is that if you want to strive for this understanding of having it all, that means you actually have to physically do it all. Most women can't afford a nanny. Most people can't afford the care work and the necessary home support, so what they end up doing is all of it, right? Then they are either otherized in the workplace. Or they're looked over for promotion because they had children or the way that people are treated when they have care responsibilities of any gender, right? It's like, "Oh, that's a distraction from the work that you're supposed to be doing."

Yes, I was really interested in all of those different moments of how feminism went from what I understood it historically as a movement, a collective movement that supports the advancement of women as a whole, as a class to one that became what I call in the book and what researchers have also called this neoliberal feminism where it's like the individual person and how you get ahead. If you can't get ahead, it's your own fault. It's because you didn't have the right planner. You didn't have the right babysitting infrastructure. You didn't work hard enough to make enough money to get all the support that you needed.

I think that's really where we are now and I think why so many young people are frustrated with this "girl boss feminism." It isn't necessarily, and I write about this quite a bit in the book, about women being entrepreneurs. That's a piece of the conversation, but I think a lot of the frustration comes from this failed promise of what workplace feminism was supposed to be for us and the insane and inordinate, and you know this because you work in the space, advice around how to ask for more money, how to get to a – all of that is important. It's really necessary.

But we're missing the forest for the trees that, statistically, we're still paid less. We're still looked over for promotion. We still get pushed off our career track if we have children. All of those advice pieces haven't actually helped us as a whole.

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FT: They haven't helped because we live in a patriarchy. We live in a sexist world, racism, capitalism. In the absence of these problems, I don't know, for lack of a better word, is that when we can maybe expect women to be able to relax and finally be free? While lean in wasn't perfect and the girl boss epithet wasn't all that it was and it's RIP, rest in power, they were efforts

to do something. We were struggling, and I think we're always going to be struggling. We're always going to be on this continuum called the feminist movement. I don't know.

Have you thought about what is the destination that we all are striving for, and what is it going to take to get there? I get that it's a slow-moving process, and there's going to be – I mean, we're seeing tradwives now trending, which is sort of the complete polar opposite of what I think, hopefully, most of us want, ultimately, not to be subservient and dependent on a man for everything. It's hard to not feel just stuck forever because these institutions are unshakable in some ways.

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SM: Absolutely. I think it's really easy to discount the lean in girl boss feminism as that was so heavily criticized. I get into that in the book where I – we all know that advice is not perfect, right? Because what I do as an individual is not going to change a system that has set up for me to fail. The fact that we have internalized the idea that we can personally do it, I think, to me, that is the biggest drawback of that advice. But just telling a woman that she should ask for more is not bad advice. Telling a woman that she can lead a company, that's not bad advice. That's good advice, right?

I think it's important to separate those two things because I think it's really easy to just throw that stuff out and be like, “Oh, that's just elitist neoliberal feminism.” Something that I really had to reckon with in the book was how many young women in my life really fed into lean in girl boss narratives. They may not be calling it that, but they were very bought into the idea that they could change their personal economic condition by working hard. Who are we to tell them otherwise? Literally, who are we to tell them otherwise, right?

I think it was really important to me to isolate what was important about that and where it didn't work. It's interesting because as the book has come out, there's some new research that's come out about lean in feminism or neoliberal feminism. Historically, I think I had always been like, “Oh, it's not great, but it's not doing harm.” What we've learned is because – and I do think a part of this is it's really easy to make women feel bad about what they're doing. It's really – whatever it is we're doing, we're so quick to criticize other women for it, right?

One of the things that has happened with lean in feminism is we internalize the idea that we alone can overcome every obstacle that comes our way. That we don't need help and that anything that we're not successful at is because of our lack of hard work. The destination to me in this moment is I think that we are sitting at the precipice of criticizing this advice, understanding it's not serving us. I think that it's easy to just say then like, "Well, then I'm going to quiet quit," or, "I'm going to a lazy girl job," or, "I don't want –"

Ultimately, that's not actually going to make us happy. I'm not saying that us as individuals, we need to solve for women's inequality. I know that's a lofty and idealistic ask, but the reality is most of us have to work. Most of us have to work. We have to figure out how to get paid for that work. I don't think the solution is that then less women should go into leadership or less women should run companies. I think what we need is a vibrant public conversation about the real obstacles that we face and for women to feel less alone in those.

I think that we are often, especially in corporate environments but even as entrepreneurs, we are encouraged to compete against each other, rather than actually seeing the value in us as a whole. I think there's a lot to learn from young people about this. I really see Gen Z being like, "No, this is my click. This is my collective. This is my –" I think the more we start working in those models, there's no easy answer because the way that capitalist patriarchy has infiltrated every part of our life is complex. There's no simple way to just be like, "We're all going to unionize." Guess what. Most of us aren't even in jobs that can unionize, right? An influencer can't unionize. If you work in a small startup, that's not –

While that language is very compelling and I think we talk a lot about it, it's really easy to just be like, "Well, then we can't do anything." For me, my hope is that, A, people feel less alone that I think that women have internalized this idea that they are failures because they have not been able to solve for this. Then to really start thinking about what I call in the book the margin of maneuverability. Where is the space you actually can make a difference? Is it a relationship that you build in the workplace?

I mean, think about work wives and the value of work wives. Is there a way to actually make that an official part of your job and say, “Here is a group of people where we come together, and we talk about what's going on in this workplace and how can we actually make it better.”

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FT: Thank you. I have so many thoughts. I mean first is just I feel like your book is an effort in that direction of raising the consciousness and making people care. Because at the end of the day, this is my question, I don't have an answer to this, how do we get people to care more, care more? What's that from? Is that from some Judd Apatow movie? I need you to care more. It sounds simple. But that's, at the end of the day, the priorities of commerce. They're trying to make – they're trying to outpace last quarter's profits.

To go to your boss or to go to your CEO and say, “We need to pay women more.” Or we need to create more benefits at work so that families, which women are typically at the charge of their families, can have more productivity at work and at home. That message, while it's intellectually sound and there's even financial data to show that when you support diversity and you address family values at work, everybody wins, it doesn't always get to the top of the to-do list. Not even number 10 on the to-do list. How do we – what is missing? What is the missing ingredient to wake people up and say we need to redo this paradigm?

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SM: I think it's a lot to ask people to wake up and care when they're navigating all of these questions, right? I don't know that that's necessarily realistic. I think one of the things I've been thinking a lot about is how managers and business leaders can really start asking these questions first because I don't know that the average employee is incentivized. The average McDonald's employee is not incentivized to actually reform the broader system and make it. They're only incentivized to make things better for themselves, right? That's just the reality. But where are the places where the decision makers and how do you lobby the decision makers?

I'm really fascinated with this question of like what is enough. What is enough in terms of how much you exploit your employees? Right now, we are living in a model where business leaders

literally will work you as much as they can while paying you as little as possible. That is not even – that is normal. That is – we do not have a labor –

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FT: That it's celebrated. That is –

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SM: It's celebrated.

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FT: You're high-fived at the quarterly meetings. Yes.

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SM: Exactly. But even for business leaders, they're starting to realize that productivity is going down because people are so frustrated. They're so frustrated in their jobs. They are quiet quitting. They're checking out. They have – I mean, I don't know this younger generation. I mean, they have things to say. They are not sitting by idly and watching this happen. That can sometimes be frustrating as a Gen Xer, where I'm just like, "Well, you have to earn and do your work to get to where I am. You don't just show up one day and get there."

I do think that they're asking really legitimate questions about the structure of the workplace. I do think that there's a role that management can play in creating more inclusive work environments where people feel safe to start asking bigger questions about the conditions of their workplace. Historically, that band, which the feminist, Barbara Ehrenreich, has called the professional-managerial class, has been positioned in opposition to worker.

One of the things I'm really starting to play with and really try to think through in the book is what does it look like for that to not be an antagonistic relationship, that that's a relationship where you're working in collaboration, and you are creating an environment that's safe for employees

where they feel comfortable, where you're always advocating for the biggest raises for hard work, just certain pieces of the culture that I feel like we've just internalized this idea that just get away with whatever you can. Get away with the worst possible situation and what does it look like to look the other way.

I talk to different businesses that have tried those models on. One of them Chani Nicholas, the astrologer. She was really explicit and went viral. They went viral because they had a job description that was very worker-first. It was like everybody gets paid \$80,000 no matter what. They have all different kinds of leave; mental health leave, menstrual leave, unlimited vacation time. The office is closed in the holidays. All of these things that we push people and make them work through that actually has now led to really high retention, really high productivity. I mean, when you use the app, it's clearly made with love. It's creative. There's not mistakes in it. Just little things that I'm thinking about as a writer where I'm like, "Wow, this is a happy team that's making this product, right?"

There is a real business case for it. But, to me, that is actually the level that needs to wake up. Just as an aside, I don't know if you saw. There was this viral clip of the CEO of AriZona Iced tea where, yes, it was so good. He was basically –

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FT: He's not going to raise the prices. Was that the viral clip where it's 99 cents forever?

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SM: Yes. They were like, "Why don't you raise the price? Everything's changed. Inflation is real." He was like, "Because I have enough money."

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FT: Yes. Oh, my gosh. Bringing us back to money, I think there's a real lesson here about not complacency because I think people are scared of reaching enough and settling for enough because then they feel like they're not playing out their ambitions. We live in a capitalist world

where more is more, and it's never enough. It's never enough for – and especially if you're modeling your life and your ambitions parallel to the rich people or “people who have made it.” Because for them, it's like they're always going to a better vacations every year. Their houses are only getting bigger.

There has to be a real kind reckoning there, too, where we get to a place. I would love to talk to that CEO of AriZona Tea and just be like, “How did you arrive at this place where you are satisfied with this definition of enough?” There was a viral article. I think it was in the New York Times magazine. I think it was this year. It was the most popular article. Or maybe it was last year. It was in response to *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, the book which became the show. It was very New York-centric and the hustle that is very – and you know this very well, the hustle that is unique to New York, to New Yorkers. But how a household making \$500,000 who lives in the suburbs wants to come back to New York, but they're just afraid they're not going to be able to afford it.

Then one woman said, “What am I supposed to do? Just like pick a lane and be happy?” I said to myself, “Yes. Actually, that's the advice.” We say that as though that's the worst possible thing, but there's something really rewarding in making a choice, and even if it's not perfect, making the most of it and finding some happiness in that. I feel like that's what's missing. Whether you choose to be a C-suite employee or not work at all in corporate America, we need the work. Part of the work is just in finding satisfaction in what we have, in what is in front of us. That hat narrative is always like, “Oh. Well, you're just being complacent.” But what's the new narrative around that that we might need to change?

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SM: Yes. No, I mean, that's a really good question because I also think that that is not a pressure that we ask of men, right? We don't ask men to say like, “What is enough in your life, right?” It's really something that women are having to face. I think the thing that I've really been thinking about and what I get into in the book is that I think that there's two pieces of it. I think there is the – what does it mean to have enough for us as individuals? What does it mean to be successful enough? What does it mean to be a good enough mother? What does it mean to feel success? I mean, I'm asking this question very top of mind as I try to measure what success is

going to be for this book, right? What is enough? What is enough podcast interviews with wonderful people such as yourself? What is enough media hits? What is enough in the Amazon sales rank?

This is a constant feedback loop of like, “Enough, enough, enough.” I think there is the internal spiritual piece of it, but I also think women are disproportionately asked to have to settle for less. We're asked to have to figure out what's enough or –

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FT: Yes, with the triggering. It's a triggering word for that reason. Yes.

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SM: Exactly. That's why it really is like a collective moment for us to say what is enough, not just – because I think if you say it or I say it, that's great for our lives. But that's not actually going to – the reason we continue pushing for more is because of all the roadblocks we face, right? We think that if we just work a little bit harder, we'll get to that promised land. Some of us will. I mean, some of us will, right? We all know where hard work can get us. But so many people are burned out right now, and so many women are burned out. That's why I think we need to really be asking this question collectively. Not just individually the spiritual response but also how do we organize other people to be asking this question.

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FT: Yes. I'm Iranian. My parents raised me, I think, also, with a bit of this false bill of goods to some extent but also with a caveat, always the caveat that things may not work out. No one's coming to save you. While that instilled a lot of fear in me, and I wrote a whole book about it, I think it also prepared me for everything you're talking about that the system is fraught, that there is no rainbow at the end of everything. Not to say that you can't find a fulfilling life and create a fulfilling life, but to think that you can just blindly follow this recipe, this script, right? This theory of what it means to make it in the workplace, I think, is dangerous and is – well, it can be very disappointing in some ways.

All that to say, not that I haven't had disappointments, not that I have felt like I've been burnt out, but at least I can't blame feeling like I was led blindly into this. I went in fully conscious that things might not work out. I was still willing to take risks, and I was still willing to not be liked in some cases. I think that's a huge thing. As Kara Swisher, who was being interviewed by Katie Couric, and Katie Couric asked her, "Kara, well, how are you so confident? You've accomplished so much. You don't give two Fs about anything, about anyone." She goes, "I think it's a lesbian thing." She's like, "I've been able to go through life and not care about what men think about me."

That is funny but it's also so profound. What do you think about that? I mean, it goes back to the very first question point, right, of like imagine a world where we don't have to worry about patriarchy and sexism.

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SM: Yes, yes. I mean, I think what's really helpful here is some of the search on resilience and grit, right? Which I do think it's interesting because when I read a lot about millennials and their economic anxieties that they experience or the shocking realities they face when they go into the workplace, and they realize that not every word uttered is brilliant, or every single thing they do is great. I'm like, "Well, I grew up in an immigrant family, so nothing I ever did was great."

It's like I was trained very well to keep my head down and work very hard in the workplace. My parents literally taught me that. I have memory of my dad. I remember my first job offer. I was like, "I'm going to counter." He was like, "What?" He's like, "You just take the job they give you. You don't counter-offer." I was like, "Oh," this kind of real anxiety that if we don't keep the job, we don't keep our immigrant status, we don't get to stay in this country.

That anxiety, I think, is something that I very much internalized. But it also – yes, it set up for me very clearly that it's not easy. This is not going to be easy, and so it's okay that I have to work hard, and it's okay that I won't be liked sometimes. I should expect discrimination in the workplace because my dad experienced discrimination in the workplace. Yes, I do think that that – I mean, that's such a smart and funny answer. But I do think it's interesting because we talk a

lot about creating inclusive workplaces, right, and making sure that people that come from a diversity of backgrounds are included.

What we often missed is how because of who I am, I actually am better suited for a lot of these workplaces in ways that have been overlooked because of racism and classism. That's something that I have found to be true, both in my management and in how I've hired, in how I think about who would be the most functional in these environments. But that's not necessarily justifying these environments. I guess, it's like a slippery slope of just because we can function in, it doesn't mean it's right or that. I do think – but yes. I'm sorry.

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FT: No. It makes me think, too, because you write in your book about the dynamic where women of color are often performing the work that allows white women to have it all. I think about the domestic workers, nannies, women who clean homes, clean houses. That domestic work is being outsourced so that the woman who owns the house can go and work in a male-dominated industry.

I just wonder, how do you square that as a woman who is ambitious, who wants to rise the ranks as a white woman, right? What do you want white women to know about how they're going about with their outsourcing and how it's maybe impacting our collective effort for all of us to have access, at least, to opportunities and a definition of workplace success?

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SM: Yes. I mean, I think that the model that we have historically understood of workplace success has been using white women's experience as the framework and really invisibilizing the labor that women of color both have to put in in the home as nannies, caretakers, house cleaners, all of that. But also that most women of color have had to work since they've come into this country. There isn't – or enslaved women, right? They survived unpaid labor, and that then translated to lower wage jobs.

Someone like my mother who wasn't the person that Helen Gurley Brown was thinking about when she wrote *Having It All*, but was the feminist blueprint, right? She was working. She was raising our family. She was educating herself. She was helping my dad start his business. She was taking care of family from India. She was active in our temple. I mean, you know. That is not – we don't think of working-class immigrant women of color as the model of feminist dream, right? We think of that as a side. That's not the dream actually. The dream is that you get wealthy enough so that you have someone taking care of your family.

I don't necessarily know that I have an explicit message for white women. I think that what happened during the pandemic is that white women got a taste of what it's like for – and I would say more affluent white women got a taste for what it's like for working class women, irrelevant of their race, because they were in a situation where they lost a lot of the supports that allowed them to be successful in their career. That includes having access to child care, letting their kids go to school, having daycare, all of those things that all of a sudden – or the tutors or all of these care workers that you could no longer have come to your house. All of a sudden, you were just doing it yourself.

I think that actually radicalized a lot of mothers. I think a lot of mothers either were like, “Actually, I don't want to work this much. I want to focus on my family.” Or they're like, “Oh, my God. Have we been just putting up with this,” right? I think that and I would say that the majority of white women are struggling, just like most working mothers are, right? They don't have enough money to support their ambitions, while also being effective caretakers. I really think this is one of those fairly universal experiences. I also think that we have a lot to learn from women of color and working class women around how they have prioritized because they've never had the privilege to say they want something different.

[00:36:27]

FT: Right. As a final question, I know your book is not how-to, but you have personal experience with this. It's around this concept of being a prisoner of your own ambition, and how do you get out? How do you get out? For anyone listening who is just like, “I hear you, Samita. I feel dead-ended. I did all the right things, and yet I don't feel fulfilled. I can't pay for things. I don't feel empowered or at least as much as I thought I should be at this point,” how can you start to

reroute in a way that doesn't necessarily – there's 180 backlash where it's like, “I'm just quitting. I'm just quitting. Not even quiet quitting. I'm loud quitting. I am never going back to the workforce.”

While I can empathize with that, I worry about that woman who's going to now be financially vulnerable, right? Because at the end of the day, work is money. How do we unlock ourselves while also protecting what's important in our safety and our security?

[00:37:30]

SM: That is, I would say, the biggest devil's advocate to this movement around like lazy girl jobs and tradwives is that we run the risk of losing a lot in terms of women's progress and us as individual women not having the financial stability and security. I mean, if you are relying on a man for your financial stability, A, that's almost untenable in our global economy today. But, B, you are vulnerable to anything that that man does should he lose his job, should he become abusive, should he –

I do think that something I really grappled with is women's financial Independence is a core tenant of feminism. That is a reality. It is not – the system that we live in right now is not going to change overnight. Hurting ourselves, cutting ourselves off at the knees isn't really the solution. I think that one of the things, and this is really what I'm hearing from other people and something I'm really trying to grapple with, is that it's not the ambition that's a bad thing, right? It's a recognition of what is possible, given what you have access to and while also then trying to make good on your ambitions, right?

Because what is a world without our ambition? That is not an exciting place. I do not want to live in a society that is not fueled by women's ambitions. I think that the pushback and the way that ambition is becoming a dirty word for women is part of the feminist backlash. It is an effort to, say, putting women back in their place and saying, “Well, we should have never let you become an astronaut. We should have never let you in the boardroom. We should have never let you do all of these things.” I don't think that's the solution.

I do think the solution is for us to really reckon with the situation that's at hand and recognize that we as individuals can't. There's things we can overcome, and then there's pieces of this that we can't. So being honest with ourselves about where are the places that we can work with the system, and where are the places where we need to collectively organize for bigger change. I really think it's happening, right? I think that people are having these conversations in earnest, and I think it's going to look different in every workplace and in every person's career.

For me, some of it is like, yes, I don't have to take every single opportunity because I'm lucky to be here. I don't have to always assume that my employer is doing me a favor. There all these things that I believed when I went into the workforce that now I'm just like, "Well, I have a lot to contribute, too, and I don't have to fake it till I make it. Who I am is enough." I think that those are some of the questions that a lot of people are starting to ask themselves. I think that is the stepping stone to this bigger consciousness-raising that we're having.

I think the thing that makes me anxious, and I'm sure this makes you anxious, too, is what is behind the quiet quitting or saying like, "I'm getting off this train." It's not because you actually want to. It's a response to conditions. I think this is a liberal interpretation because I do think tradwives are being weaponized against us. A, I don't think there are a lot of them. I think the media loves to focus on women that prove that feminism has failed. So we're always told that like, "Oh." It's like, "How many do you actually know?" I literally don't know any tradwives. I don't know any lazy girls, and I don't know any tradwives. But according to the press, they're everywhere, right?

[00:40:46]

FT: Well, yes. Because when they do arrive on social, they do attract. They're like bees to honey. It's just like – because a lot of us are hate-watching. We're not there to take notes.

[00:40:58]

SM: Also, you're not a tradwife if you're building a social platform. You are literally an entrepreneur. I don't know what to tell you. Whatever the content might be, you're selling a product.

[00:41:06]

FT: It could be for an Amish woman. I mean, there's that literally.

[00:41:09]

SM: Yes. I mean, really. I do think that's the reality that we're dealing with is most of us can't be tradwives. Most of us can't be lazy girls. It's really about how do we take this energy, this anxiety that we have right now, this frustration that we're feeling of hitting the glass ceiling over and over and over and actually turn that into something more collectively beneficial for us, so yes.

[00:41:34]

FT: Well, as one former stay-at-home girlfriend said in the news, "When you give a man the power to feed you, you also give him the power to starve you." Yes. Things didn't work out for her, and I'm glad she came forth and clean about it because we need more of on the other side of things, when you choose to give up your autonomy to another person.

Samita, thank you so much. I'm really looking forward to connecting with you. I'm in the middle of your book. Rebecca Traister, author of *Good and Mad*, says that you are one of the smartest voices we have on gender, power, capitalist exploitation and the entrenched inequities of the workplace, and I agree. Thank you so much.

[00:42:18]

SM: Thank you. It was so great to be here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:42:22]

FT: Thanks so much to Samita for joining us. Her book, again, is called *The Myth of Making It*. Be sure to stick around for Wednesday's episode, especially if you're interested in buying a house this year or next year. We have the chief economist from Redfin here to tell us what's happening in the market. Will it be a better time to wait until the fall when the Fed is expected to lower interest rates? That's Wednesday's show. In the meantime, I hope your day is So Money.

[END]