I’ve belonged to a book club for many years now, and one of our recent selections was *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook. If you haven’t read it, it’s essentially the story of her meteoric rise to success as a female in a male-dominated industry.

As Sandberg acknowledges, it didn’t hurt that she had strong male sponsors and was in the right place at the right time. Yet her appeal to women to “lean in”—to advocate for themselves and take their rightful place at the boardroom table—resonated with women and men alike.

But how big an issue is it? Is there really a significant gender gap in the workplace? Or could it be that women are simply holding themselves back?

Data from Statistics Canada reveal that, in 2005, young women (ages 25 to 29) with a bachelor’s degree earned 89 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Those with a registered apprenticeship or trades certificate earned just 65 cents for every dollar earned by men with the same qualification.

And a 2014 BMO Financial Group survey of more than 1,000 Canadians reveals that two-thirds of Canadians believe men have more career opportunities than women. More than half (55%) of Canadians—62% of women—feel there is still a “glass ceiling” for women looking to advance their careers.

At a roundtable on the BMO research, Julie Barker-Merz, vice-president and chief operating officer, BMO Insurance, talked about how her career stalled when she hit the senior management level. “It was the first time in my career where I felt that potential wasn’t associated with my career,” she explained.

When women do achieve high-powered jobs, they often struggle to balance the competing demands of work and family. There are always trade-offs, noted Caroline Dabu, vice-president and head of enterprise wealth planning, BMO Financial Group. “As senior leaders, we have to be honest with young women in terms of those trade-offs....If you take parental leave, there is an impact on your earnings. There is an impact from a career perspective.”

So how can we close the gender gap? Sandberg’s solution involves opening men’s eyes to the issues and rallying women to support one another. “If we can succeed in adding more female voices at the highest levels, we will expand opportunities and extend fair treatment to all,” she writes. That’s a worthy goal—but if there aren’t many women in those roles now, then how can they help others to move forward?

It’s a subject that involves passionate views and no easy answers. But the first step is to ask the right questions.