RESHMA SAUJANI: The CDC released a report saying that the two subgroups that are suffering the most pandemic are 19 to 24 year olds and moms.

You literally saw 11 million women leave the workforce. We lost almost 30 years of progress in nine months.

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And so if you want to feel like people are committed to you, start taking care of their families.


In a new book, Reshma argues that the future of women and work will be radically different.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Reshma because the post-pandemic workforce is uncomfortably less gender diverse than it was going into 2020.

Reshma's new book is a battle cry for a different approach, an approach that puts much of the burden squarely on businesses.

She's rethought her own embrace of “Lean in," that putting the spotlight on women to solve the problems of workplace achievement have just added another burden to a load that’s sent stress levels among women sky high.

Our social safety net can’t just be moms, she argues. And business leaders have to approach their human resource policies — for men as well as women — with that as a priority.

Reshma also takes Silicon Valley to task for not diversifying their tech force with the same speed and breadth that consulting firms and banks have.
Reshma's lessons are about not accepting the way things are. We need to address the crisis facing women and moms, she says, with the same speed, intensity, and effectiveness that we mustered in response to Covid. Because our social health — and our business health — depends on it.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIN: I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Reshma Saujani, founder of Girls Who Code and author of several books, including the newly released, Pay Up: The Future of Women and Work, and Why it's Different Than You Think. Reshma, thanks for joining us.

SAUJANI: Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

SAFIN: We first met several years ago when I was at Fast Company. I'm not sure if it was when you were running for Congress or after you launched Girls Who Code. You have always been fearless, taking on what might seem impossible challenges. Your new book Pay Up is certainly provocative, and I'm eager to get to that and to what you think about the evolving equity in the business world and the tech world.

To start, I wanted to ask you about what you call the Marshall Plan For Moms. You wrote an op-ed about it in late 2020, then placed ads in the New York Times and the Washington Post calling on the Biden administration to support it. And you've launched a nonprofit around it now. What is the Marshall Plan For Moms? Where did the idea come from? What's the goal?

SAUJANI: Yeah, well, look, January of 2020, Girls Who Code had a Super Bowl ad. I had a new newborn baby. I was on top of the world, and I was excited to take my maternity leave and like basically spend time with my new baby, maybe get a date night in with my husband. Then, CovidOVID-19 happened. I found myself having to go back to work, a few weeks after my son was born, having to homeschool my kindergartner, and having to save my nonprofit Girls Who Code from havoc, because when pandemics hit the first resources to go are often to women and girls. My entire leadership team were working moms, and we were barely hanging on, Bob. You know, I got Covid, and it barely registered. My liver failed. We were just exhausted. What we were saying to ourselves was, "When schools open in September, when the schools open, we'll get some reprieve." Well, the schools never opened, and they came up with this idea of hybrid learning, where working moms get to log-on their kids at nine o'clock, 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock, all the while they maintain their full-time job. You literally saw 11 million women leave the workforce. At the beginning of 2020, women were actually 51% of the labor force. The first time in the history of our nation. We lost almost 30 years of progress in nine months.

I kept thinking, well, where's the plan? You can't lose all those jobs like that without a plan. There was none. That was why I was like, "We need a Marshall Plan For Moms." Because this feels like World War II, bombed out cities like public-private sector
strategies, we need a plan. That's when it really started to galvanize the government to do something. Finally, to galvanize the private sector to provide support to working women.

SAFIAN: Of course, immediately everyone heard your plea and was like, "Yeah, there's a Marshall Plan For Moms, and everybody knows about it." No, that didn't really happen. Right?

SAUJANI: No, it took time. I mean, the idea of supporting moms, ironically, Bob is very controversial. You know, I made the mistake of reading the comment section on my op-ed. People on the right said, "Well, motherhood's a choice. You don't deserve nice things." People on the left said, "What about the dads?" Even though, again, all the job losses in December of 2020 were women. This idea of having a Marshall Plan For Moms was on one hand controversial, but on the other hand, millions of mothers, millions of working women, millions of men, I mean, we've followed up that ad to Biden with an ad from 50 men, led by Steph Curry saying, "We agree." We don't think America's social safety net should be mothers. That we need to fix the structure to make it possible to work and have a child.

SAFIAN: This effort on the Marshall Plan For Moms, did it lead you to writing this book Pay Up? Had you been planning to write this book before?

SAUJANI: No, I did not want to write another book. No, that was not the plan. It did, because part of what I saw was that Congress needed to grow a heart and that they were busy bailing out airlines, but they weren't going to bail out moms. Even in this moment, again, of the largest exodus of women leaving the labor force in the history of our nation, even then, they couldn't provide relief to moms. I really saw the opportunity for the workplace, for the private sector, to really step up and provide some of that structure at this moment. Especially given the great resignation, the jobs numbers came out and there are more jobs open than ever before. Working women actually have a lot of leverage, and I never think you should waste a good crisis.

SAFIAN: I mean, there is an irony that if you hear politicians talk like, "Yeah, moms are great." When it comes time to actually act in the interest of 11 million jobs disappearing, it just didn't create its own momentum.

SAUJANI: No, I'm still surprised. I'm still surprised how this is not on the front page of Time magazine. I'm still surprised that this is not the first thing that folks are talking about. I think it's because we don't feel the pain of it yet. I think part of it is that offices aren't open. You don't see the amount of women missing. You're not going to see both the short term and the long-term effects of having all these women not just leave, but downshift their careers. You're not going to see the effects of the mental health crisis that we have. 51% of working women say they're anxious and depressed. The CDC released a report saying that the two subgroups that are suffering the most pandemic are 19 to 24 year olds and moms. Bob, moms don't break. We don't. We don't break, but we're
broken. That means something is deeply wrong and deeply needing to be fixed. I think that reckoning is coming. What's going to be really annoying is I feel like I'm going to be saying, like I told you so. Actually if we intervened, when we should have intervened, the ramifications from an economic perspective, from a mental health perspective, from a perspective of what's happening to our children, would not have been as dire as they're going to be if we don't do something.

SAFIAN: The book talks about why the future of women at work is different than you think. What are we all missing?

SAUJANI: Well, we got to tell people something different than we've been telling them. For so long, I mean, I spent the past 10 years telling my students to barnstorm the corner office. To lean in really hard. To girl-boss your way to the top, and I was wrong. I mean, like I said, I found myself in the pandemic with two little babies and trying to run an organization, and it nearly broke me. I learned the hard way that having it all is a euphemism for doing it all. It didn't matter if you got a mentor, or you delegated, or you color coded your calendar. It wasn't about fixing the woman. It was about fixing the system. Literally, the entire industrial complex of corporate feminism needs to be throw on the garbage. Because it is actually keeping us further away from equality, rather than moving us forward.

SAFIAN: You talk about the big lie of corporate feminism, so what is the big lie of corporate feminism? That your career is the center, should be the center? What's the lie? What's going on?

SAUJANI: I think the lie is that you just gotta work harder, that you gotta fix yourself, that you just gotta lean in, you gotta raise your hand, that you gotta take another course on teaching you how to invest. And it's why even the word imposter syndrome, where does that come from? You have all these women who are at the top of their class, and they get to the workplace, and suddenly they think they're not qualified anymore because we're told that.

Because what's really happening is we're doing two and a half jobs, and we're doing the cooking, and the cleaning, and the domestic work, and the cognitive labor, and figuring out whether our kid needs more shoes and what pediatrician appointment you should do, all the while, we're trying to be a CEO. And so when we think we're not cutting it, we think something is wrong with us because that's what we've been told. And instead, what we should be fighting for and what we should have been fighting for is getting to equality at home. And then we can go get to the mentor and the sponsor, and do all the things. But until we fix the unpaid labor part of the equation, all of that was in vain.

SAFIAN: You mentioned something earlier about moving from trying to have a government response to the issues to having a corporate response. So what should businesses be doing differently? There are a lot of business leaders who are listening. What would you tell them
about how they should think about operating, structuring their organizations as they move forward?

SAUJANI: Yeah. I mean, I think what's driving the great resignation, it's not that people don't want to work. They don't want to work for you. And so, as we're in the middle of this talent war, we have to think about what people really want. And I think what people really want after these past few years is to spend more time with their family. It's not just what working women want. It's what working dads want too. So I think that the first benefit that companies should be thinking about offering and leading on subsidizing childcare. Childcare is an economic issue. For the vast majority of parents, they pay more for their childcare than they do for their mortgage. And quite frankly, the cost of attrition is higher than if you started subsidizing childcare. And so, if you want to ensure loyalty, if you want to feel like people are committed to you, start taking care of their families, and start reducing a major cost driver for families.

Right now, 10% of companies subsidize childcare. I'm building a business coalition to basically make that number go to 100. And I'm not asking you to do it out of the goodness of your heart. I'm asking you to do it because it makes business sense. And we're already providing other benefits. I mean, most companies will pay for you to freeze your eggs or do your IVF or your gym membership. Well, then provide support when actually people do have children. The second thing that I think is really important is thinking about the role that companies actually play in exacerbating inequality at home. Now, this one is going to be a little bit harder, Bob.

SAFIAN: All right.

SAUJANI: Okay?

SAFIAN: I'm buckling in. I'm ready.

SAUJANI: Some of it's easier. Some of it's harder. But paid leave, I think it's not enough just to offer paid leave. You should, at the minimum, have gender-neutral paid leave policies. Apple, for example, does not have a gender-neutral paid leave policy. There's no reason in this day and age you should be giving different time off for fathers and mothers. And I want to go a step further, and I think that we want to get to where Norway is, and we should start mandating paid leave. We should start tying paid leave to performance reviews.

We should start literally going around the office and saying, "Don't come back to work unless you've spent X amount of months, weeks." You know what I mean? Caring for your child because studies show that when men spend time with their children, when they do the caretaking, when they walk them to school, when they go to soccer class, they live longer. They're healthier. They're happier. Their rate of diabetes, heart attacks go down. And so I think making that investment and just asking yourself, what role do my
policies play in exacerbating gender inequality at home? What can I do to help my employees get to a 50/50 ratio at home?

SAFIAN: Hmm. As I'm listening, it's like we're spending too much time working, or our organizations are expecting us to work too much. It's like for the sake of productivity, there should be more people to share that load so I have that time to be at home.

SAUJANI: Well, I don't even know if that's true. Right? Because I feel like all the studies show that remote working flexibility is actually not messing with productivity. I think that we're forcing people to do FaceTime and to do performative work when we don't need them to be. So many dads have said to me, “The commute doesn't allow me to take my kid to school.” Now, that's just a waste of time that you could be spending doing something else that's going to make you happy. And you know that when your mental health …

I mean, all the … tons of productivity studies on mental health, that when you invest in your employees’ mental health, they're actually more productive. Their performance goes up. And so it's the same thing here. I don't think it's about working less. I think it's about killing hustle culture.

SAFIAN: Mm-hmm. In other words, not wasting time on work just to prove that you are working as opposed to actually performing.

SAUJANI: Yeah, and I think I did that. I built one of the largest women and girls nonprofits in the world. I raised $100 million in nine years. When I think about my first son, I didn't see him walk. I didn't see him crawl. I didn't hear his first words. I was on two planes, two trains a week. I saw him 20 minutes a day, and I was proud of that because that showed how committed I was to changing the world. And when I look back, I didn't need to do half of the things that I did. And I'm actually learning that now as I'm building my second movement, which is probably going to be bigger. Marshall Plan For Moms is going to be bigger because, in many ways, the problem is bigger. I play tennis in the morning. I take my baby to the park. I am a member of my PTA. And so I don't need to do it that way.

SAFIAN: You could raise that $100 million without having to be on all those planes and spending all that time away.

SAUJANI: Absolutely.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: Before the break we heard Reshma Saujani talk about the continuing obstacles for women in the workplace and why we need a Marshall Plan For Moms.
Now she critiques Silicon Valley for its persistent gender inequities, despite improvements she cites in other industries. She talks about how Girls Who Code and other efforts have changed the pipeline for women in tech, and she offers lessons on using this moment to set in motion a new balance that can be a win-win for businesses and for all of us.

Your first book, *Women Who Don't Wait in Line*, argued that there's never been a better time to be a woman. Do you still feel that way?

**SAUJANI:** Oh, Bob, I don't think it's a great time to be a woman right now. I don't. I think between what's happening with our reproductive rights, I think what's happening to our mental health, I think what's happening to our labor market participation, I think women are in crisis. I do. But I'm still hopeful that there's a light at the end of the tunnel. But I think the hard part, and this is why I'm so glad we're talking, is that we can't do it alone. We need allies. We need men. We need childless women and men. We need help. We need support because I think so many women, working women, are exhausted. Why do you think more women ... interesting thing for you, you know, as a journalist. More women called into the New York Times to scream than called their Congresspeople for paid leave? What does that say about the state of mind that we are in?

**SAFIAN:** It's desperation, and it's feeling like–

**SAUJANI:** Yup.

**SAFIAN:** —there is nothing you can do. I mean, that's what it feels like. Right?

**SAUJANI:** It does.

**SAFIAN:** That's why you scream instead of doing something more productive.

**SAUJANI:** Instead of marching.

**SAFIAN:** Right.

**SAUJANI:** Instead of marching, literally, and I think that's right. I think women are screaming instead of marching. And I think that part of writing this book was to say, "Okay, I want to tell you the things you could ask for. I'm not going to tell you to ask for them right now. I'm not going to tell you to march. I'm not going to tell you to protest, I'm going to give you information," because that's the other thing. I think that women feel like there's no hope because we've been taught to feel like these are our personal problems that we're not supposed to ask the government. We're not supposed to ask our employers. We're not supposed to ask our partners. We're just supposed to do it. And we're lost because we can't do it anymore.
SAFIAN: And things would be healthier if women really were marching. Because it would mean you felt like you had agency to actually have impact.

SAUJANI: Yeah. I think we want control. It's going to feel healthier, and it's again why I wrote this book. I actually think the place to start is not Washington, but is in your workplace. I am obsessed with workplace organizing. I think women want to have control over their life immediately now. So if I'm a mom and I want flexibility or I want predictability, or I want some support on my childcare, if I can fight for that or get that, I am suddenly having control over my life. And that shows me, oh, I don't have to do this by myself. I can get support from my employer. Maybe I can get support from my government. And that's where the opportunity is.

SAFIAN: You mentioned Apple's policies that maybe didn't stand up to the goals that you have. Are there workplace organizing models that you feel like that's the way places should work?

SAUJANI: Yeah, I mean, I think there are great pieces. So, I think that Netflix has a great policy on paid leave. I think Accenture has made a commitment when it comes to returnships and bringing women back. I think Patagonia has an in-house daycare. Disney has an in-house daycare. Google has an in-house daycare. So, I think that there are good examples of companies doing things. I'm actually very hopeful that the private sector can actually move on these things.

I don't feel like that's a wow. Actually, I'm like, oh, we can get this. But I think we have to ask. I think we have to demand. I think it has to be that one company who's like, “I'm subsidizing this much childcare. This is how I'm going to do it. And all the rest of them will follow.” And it's going to happen. And it's going to happen this year.

SAFIAN: During the pandemic, you got pulled into Girls Who Code, keeping it moving at a time that was tough for everyone. How much progress have we made in bridging the gender gap in computing? I mean, Girls Who Code, it's a decade ago that you launched it, right?

SAUJANI: Yeah. We've taught 450,000 girls to code. Covid didn't slow us down. I mean, I think it's been devastating for students, especially students of color and underserved students in terms of the other responsibilities that they had to have. But we figured out how to very quickly switch to teaching online. So we didn't have to sacrifice scale. So, I think Girls Who Code, we built the pipeline. When I started Girls Who Code, if you went into the University of Illinois’ Computer Science department, it was still 18, 19% a decade ago. Now it's in its 30s. MIT, half. So, there is a flood of young women majoring in computer science. I laugh now because when I would speak to people 10 years ago, people would come up to me and they'd say, “I'm an engineer. Or I really would … I mean, how do I get my … maybe I won't go to this coding class.”

Now, I was just in Phoenix, in Orlando, and I'm literally surrounded by parents who are like, "Will you take a photo with me? My daughter's a captain of her robotics team." And
it's changed. You turn on Netflix, every cool teen show, the protagonist is a cool girl coder. We have made it cool. We have shifted the interest of girls into this field. Now the opportunity … I’m not going to call it a problem. The opportunity is to get companies to actually hire them.

SAFIAN: Yeah. Because if you go to Silicon Valley today or a lot of tech companies that even outside of Silicon Valley—

SAUJANI: Doesn't look different.

SAFIAN: It hasn't changed that much.

SAUJANI: No, it hasn't. Because of them.

SAFIAN: Because of them.

SAUJANI: Because of them.

SAFIAN: Now who's them?

SAUJANI: Because of the companies. Because they have not accepted that they're not operating meritocracies, that there's a lot of resistance. Now, if you go to Accenture, Deloitte, Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey, all the coders they're there. In fact, finance companies — Bank of America, JP Morgan, Citi Group — they're hiring more female engineers and computer scientists; where it's not happening is at Google and Facebook and places, quite frankly, that know what I ate for breakfast this morning. I mean, I often walk around, Bob, with a sheet of the top 10 schools that these companies are recruiting from. And to tell them exactly, this is how many women in 2001, 2002, 2020, graduated in their engineering departments, graduated in their CS departments. These are the schools that you recruit from. Why doesn't your technology team reflect the graduation rates of these colleges?

SAFIAN: And the answer you get?

SAUJANI: "Reshma, I didn't know that. I got to go talk to my head of HR." They don't know. They don't know that it's changed. You can't say it's a pipeline problem anymore. You have to start looking at and trying to figure out why it is, that they're not getting in the door or they're leaving. 50% of women under the age of 35 will leave tech by the time of 35. So, within three years. And that's culture. That is because there's a broken culture there. And we know that; we've always known that. But there's been resistance to fixing that culture. Often I always say something basic: put every single one of your male engineers through a course on sexual harassment, like a real one, and how to not say microaggressions.
SAFIAN: Yeah. It's funny. I'm thinking about the unrest at Activision last summer and the tumult over legal scrutiny and employee walkouts about a bad and unsupportive culture. And then they get acquired by Microsoft. It's almost like a reward.

SAUJANI: Yes. It is. And it is like, there aren't any real KPIs on what needs to change. There's no real commitments. Like I know and you know, as CEOs, that if you say, "I am going to have half of my ... I mean, just grow by 10 points, be female, be Black, be Latino," You get it done. There has been nothing that I have not put a KPI around that I have not done. The entire organization will move around that goal. So, I just start to ask: Do you want to get it? And the other big thing for me as I stepped down was a sense of like, can it change? If cultures are built without women, without people of color, like can Facebook actually really change? And maybe the solution is just building the next generation of companies that are equitable. And that starts with the leadership team being diverse. Start with diverse founders. Start with a diverse e-team. I think that's where I'm leaning.

SAFIAN: It's just slower that way though, isn't it? I mean, you want it to happen in all places: new companies and existing companies.

SAUJANI: Yeah. I agree. I've been doing a lot of work with Web3, and the diversity that I see there is amazing. The amount of students who email me who are like starting a company ... I mean I'm disappointed in big tech in the fact that, again, it's just a huge opportunity. You're just missing out on talent. You see what happened at Activision, and you see what happened at Uber back in the day. And you're just like, "that sucks for you because you're just missing out." Because nobody wants to work there anymore.

SAFIAN: You are an active angel investor. Your husband is a tech investor and founder. How much of this issue in tech is because of the investors as opposed to the people running the firms?

SAUJANI: I think a lot of the problem is investors. VC is still very white male, and people who get funded are still very white male, which is why my husband and I started making these angel investments, which are for women and people of color, period. And so, most people who have brilliant ideas don't get to actually execute on them. I see this as a social entrepreneur. It's funny, Bob. I'm starting my second movement, my second organization. I just built Girls Who Code and, I think, built a game-changing organization. And now I'm saying to the world, "Hey, I want to do it again." And I have a track record. People should be throwing money at me, throwing money at me, but I got to go with my little tin can and get my, now, again, $10,000, $20,000, $50,000. And I wonder, if I wasn't a woman, if I wasn't brown, if I wasn't trying to solve a problem that was facing women, would it be easier for me? I think it would.

So it's never about ability; it's never even about track record. It's about whether when people see you and see the problem you're trying to solve, do they relate? What's
fascinating, Bob, though, I will say, the first three funders for me that wrote me six figure checks were all men. And they were either men who had gone on this journey with me before and knew when Reshma Saujani says she's about to solve something, she's not ... When I say I'm going to get companies to subsidize childcare, I'm not messing around. Or they had single moms. So there are pain points both in ventures for for-profit businesses and for social entrepreneurs that need to get fixed.

SAFIAN: So when you think about this landscape at this moment, what's at stake right now? What do you feel is at stake?

SAUJANI: Everything's at stake. Everything's at stake because we have an opportunity to build a new normal. What's so frustrating about this ‘future of work’ conversation is that the conversation is still: are we going back to the office or not? Two years later, we can't talk about what the design should ... Maybe work days should be nine to three to match school days, maybe we should be offering different kinds of benefits like childcare, maybe we should be thinking about technology so people can actually work remotely and be in the office and still feel like they're able to connect. How do you build community with people that are not in the… We could be having so many different, exciting, innovative conversations, but we're pulled back, people are trying to make us have the same exact one. So I think the need for resistance, the need for these two years to not be in vain, the need to basically be able to walk out of this and say, "Who do I want to be when I get out of this? And what do I want to be? What do I want to build? What do I want to create?" is critical because this should be a moment of innovation.

SAFIAN: It is interesting that when the pandemic hit, and there was all that change that had to happen so fast because we were locked down, it opened the door to say, "Well, how do we rethink everything?" Because we had to rethink everything. Now that we don't have that same pressure, instead of continuing to rethink, we're saying, "Oh, let's go back to the way things were before, or how do we recreate the way things were before because the way things before were so great?"

SAUJANI: Exactly. And they weren't. It's funny, I find this even in my microcosm at Girls Who Code. Before the pandemic, we built these classrooms of 20 girls in companies. And let me be honest, that was inefficient, because essentially you were running the largest in person summer camp in the world. And then we switched those to virtual. And what we learned is we could teach more girls, and it was cheaper, and we didn't have transportation issues, and you could actually teach more poor girls, more girls of color, but still companies were like, "Can't they go back to the old model?" And I was like, "But why?" You're teaching more girls. You're building the pipeline. You're having the same results in terms of conversion into wanting to major in computer science. But I think it is this psychological thing that “that must have been good,” and what we've built is just a replacement because we couldn't have that thing.
So, the need to step back … And this is what I'm telling women with *Pay Up* is you don't have to go back to a broken system. And what's fascinating even there, the Great Resignation is actually being driven by women. Women are quitting. And what's fascinating is they're quitting, and they're going to a new place, and then they're quitting again because they still have the same imbalance. Maybe what we need to be doing at this moment is figuring out how we can empower you to ask for what you need, how we can actually shift companies into recognizing that you can offer these benefits and it's a win-win for you because they'll stay longer.

**SAFIAN:** And in that way, the Great Resignation in some way it's a sign of progress. It's like yeah, because you have to get better if you're going to keep these folks around.

**SAUJANI:** It can be. It's funny. I went to an Aziz Ansari concert, and he was saying, "I am visiting New York, and everything just feels slower. There's just less people." And so now it feels like the Great Resignation is a burden, but it doesn't have to be. And I think for the ones who have resigned, it's freedom.

**SAFIAN:** Well, Reshma, this has been great. Thanks so much for doing this.

**SAUJANI:** Thank you.