

Talks at GS
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Jean Case What I learned there was sometimes the best way forward is not to continue on the path that you're on but find a different path.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Asahi Pompey: Hi everyone. And welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Asahi Pompey. And I serve as President of the Foundation and Global Head of Corporate Engagement. I am thrilled to be joined today by Jean Case, a true pioneer in very many senses of the word. As many of you know, Jean was an executive at AOL in the early days. And for the past decade, she's really been an advocate for impact investment and the impact investment movement. She's also a best-selling author, Chairman of the National Geographic Society, also CEO of the Case Foundation. And not to mention, a personal favorite of mine, she's been an

incredible partner to our 10,000 Small Businesses program, which we're really, really thrilled to have Jean's partnership.

So, with that, I want to say welcome Jean. It's really a pleasure to be with you.

Jean Case: Well, thanks so much, Asahi. And hello everyone. It's really a thrill to be back at Goldman Sachs. Excited to be here. I feel like Goldman has been an important partner for many, many years in this work around impact, around 10,000 Women, around 10,000 Small Businesses, et cetera.

Asahi Pompey: Let's dive right in. I'm always curious to know sort of where people get started in terms of your interests in impact investing, and what really brought you there.

Jean Case: Sure. Well, we have a pretty young audience. So, chances are some of you aren't familiar with AOL. But back in the day, it was really the company that really took forward the internet revolution. Very consumer minded.

And I've said many times, if you would have walked with me in the halls in those early days when we were building that company, you might not have necessarily known it was a company because we were so mission minded. You know, our real goal was a focus on democratizing access to information and communication and ideas for the world. And that was really what drove us everyday.

Eventually, you know, at its peak we carried 50 percent of the nation's internet traffic. So, I think seeing up close and personally the impact one company could have on creating benefit to the world, you know, that obviously really made me think hard about, well, gosh, what does that mean more broadly for capital and for helping lots of companies come into being that can play a positive role for society and for our planet?

Asahi Pompey: We see impact investment sort of making its way from what may be considered sort of the outskirts of how people think of investment, to really towards the center. Tell us a bit about that movement and your sense about sort of the scalability of it all.

Jean Case: I think it's always really important to level set a little bit, Asahi. And sort of talk about, well, what do we mean with impact investing? And then what role does that have to do with ESG? And then what about sustainable investing, right? Because all of these terms fly around and they're not necessarily interchangeable.

So, impact investing, more specifically as many of you know, is really when the product or service itself is intended to bring benefit, as I said, to society or the planet through its very offerings. ESG, of course, relies on a variety of factors that a company will measure itself against if it's doing the right things, which are environmental, social, and governance. And we can talk a little bit about unpacking some of that. But as all of you know, there's been truly a fever around ESG in recent years. We see it growing. We see a young generation driving a lot of interest in that, combined with women investors as well.

And today, there really isn't a player in finance that isn't thinking about that. The SEC itself is so concerned about how fast everything is happening that they are proposing a

set of regulations around transparency and measurement in the space.

Asahi Pompey: Can you talk a bit more about that? Is it heading in the right direction in terms of how the SEC is thinking about it?

Jean Case: Well, you know, just to level set with all of you, I spend most of my time with founders and with new companies. Right? I'm just really big believer that that is going to drive the future innovation and benefit, you know, that we want to see in society. And when you're building a company, you really don't want a bunch of regulations pushed on you, right? And I know many of you see this with some of the small companies you work for. So, you know, I think that's a real thing.

But in this particular space, and we use the term ESG, but today, any product, any service, any company, any fund can put something out there under the ESG label with absolutely no measurement, no standards, and no transparency around that. So, while I'm not usually quick to embrace a lot of regulation as new movements come into

play. In this particular case, we're seeing a tremendous amount of greenwashing. And I think, you know, what that means is it will hurt the movement more broadly.

Asahi Pompey: What I like about what you're doing in particular is you're sort of demystifying it. You're taking all that jargon away and really getting to the core of what it means to make these kinds of investments.

Jean Case: That's right. Well, you're talking about our newsletter. For those of you that don't know, we have a weekly newsletter. It's free. It's like a five-minute read. And it really is designed to bring new investors who've heard about impact investing or ESG, what is this? What do I need to know? What are the implications? How could I jump in if I want to? Or if I've already started, you know, what do I need to be keeping track of?

And yes, we really do try to make it jargon free. And we actually bring a little bit of sass to the subject because it's really--

Asahi Pompey: A little bit of sass.

Jean Case: It's really focused on next gen. Because, you know, I have just-- we did a ten-year long study of millennials very early. And the reason we did this, and their attitudes and perspective towards social good-- the reason we did this Asahi is because pretty much all of my professional life I've always been very excited about what next gen can do in terms of, you know, motivating us, helping us see things differently.

And in the earliest days as millennials were first coming of age, there was this view, they were called slackers. They were-- you know, "They're not going to work hard. They're this. They're that." And I was seeing something very different with those that I was working with. And that was, sure, they were idealistic, like every young generation. But they really wanted to change the idealism into action.

And we're seeing that. We saw that first as they were conscious consumers. And today as they're moving to conscious investors.

Asahi Pompey: My next question was going to be exactly

this, which is talking about sort of gen Z, millennial, what you're seeing from them compared to other generations. And in particular, what accounts for that shift?

Jean Case: When you think about it, you know, many of them were young as they, in some cases not even born yet, at 9/11. So, they were born into a post 9/11 world or that were very young when 9/11 took place.

Then they had the financial crisis. I mean, they've heard their whole lives, really, because it has been, you know, for a number of decades we've been talking about the warming planet, right? So, the kind of experience that they have had, has been very, very different, I think, then the generations that came before them.

But on the economic front, it's important to note what's going on there too which is it's the largest workforce in history. Right? Millennials and gen Z combined. They are making more than any generation before them as they come into the workforce. They're investing more than any young generation before them. And they're investing earlier.

You know, it is not uncommon to have 18- and 21-year-olds trying to buy a fraction of a Tesla stock, for instance. And I really am jazzed by this because, you know, what you really want, the perfect world is to get a little bit of investing experience when you can take risks. If you're feeding a family of four, you've got to pay that mortgage, you cannot take the same risks that you can early in your life when you don't have those heavy responsibilities.

Asahi Pompey: We've got the stats here. So, millennials and gen Z, they're poised also to be on the receiving end of a massive wealth transfer in the tens of trillions of dollars. And so, in terms of the impact that this group can have in particular on ESG, on impact investing, they're poised to have a really outsized impact.

Jean Case: Yeah, there's no question. And if you're a company like Goldman Sachs or a company out there across the board, there are a couple things you really care about, right? You really care about meeting the needs and the interests of your next generation customers. That's really, I mean, through all time most companies have focused on, am I in that sweet spot of where the future

growth will come from? Similarly, the next generation of investors. You know? Who's going to invest in my company and who's not? And then of course as you said, the wealth transfer.

And to give you some sense of that, that's estimated, and it's already underway, to be between 30 and 40 trillion dollars of inheritance. And one of the things I think is a really interesting symbol or sign is that E & Y put out a study and said that 70 percent of young people and women who inherit will fire their wealth advisors.

Asahi Pompey: 70 percent.

Jean Case: 70 percent.

Asahi Pompey: I'm sitting up in my seat here.

Jean Case: And we can understand why that is. Because, you know, there was this old ad that said, you know, "This isn't your father's Oldsmobile." And the whole idea was we're new and we're different, we're not that old, you know, fuddy duddy car your dad drove. And I think there's a little

bit of that at work here. You know? Like I think in many cases they view that the wealth advisor has been going along with the plan that isn't necessarily consistent with the way next gen investors want to see the world play out, or women particularly. And combined, it's a really powerful force.

And I think now, you know, folks are scrambling to try to make sure they're in a good place with those demographics.

Asahi Pompey: In terms of the ESG all being together, is there any movement, perhaps, to separate them or it's here to stay in the way that it is right now? Because it creates some confusion.

Jean Case: It does create confusion. And frankly, impact investing created confusion in the early days because people weren't sure is that a business thing? You're talking about impact. Or is that a non-profit? Right? So, we sort of had a nomenclature problem in this space for a while.

But I do think ESG is emerging as a standard. I have suggested that maybe, if we're going to keep in separate

letters, maybe we add one more which is D for diversity. Because of this body of data that suggests diverse teams are so much stronger, you know, even if you don't care about the social justice part of it, you care as an investor about wanting to invest in things that you think have the promise of outperforming. So, I just, a little tongue in cheek wrote a piece about maybe it should be ESGD. Because to actually find diversity data as companies or funds are reporting out on their ESG factors, it's pretty hard. You've got to go pretty deep. And sometimes it's just not included at all.

Asahi Pompey: You mentioned greenwashing before. And we've heard lots of investors really be concerned about greenwashing. Can you talk a bit about that in particular?

Jean Case: Well, I think chances are you all have seen it too. These promises made under ESG. But then when you peel back the onion and you say, "What are they really invested in or what are they really doing there," you know, is the there there? Too often you can find, ugh, that doesn't feel like ESG to me. Which is, going back to that conversation on the SEC, it really is why I have come

around to believing that we really do need a set of standards and measurement if we're going to take this forward.

The risk is truly an existential one to these movements more broadly. And why is that? Because if we bring a bunch of investors along believing that the company or the fund is doing these kinds of things, and they ultimately discover it was all, you know, not very real. I think it hurts the movement more broadly. We need to get real about what we're saying when we're saying ESG.

Asahi Pompey: So, a question around sort of disclosure. So far, disclosure goes, we're confronting the dangers of climate change poses to our financial system, the company's economic stability. Will some of these changes sort of encourage businesses to take more aggressive steps to sort of minimize the effect of climate change?

Jean Case: Yeah. And I'd love to talk about oil and gas as an example here. You know, traditionally in the climate movement there was this view that you had to divest of the dirty companies, okay, the oil and gas, the fossil fuel

companies. There's a bit of a changing perspective now which is, really, walk away from them or get in the game and be highly engaged to encourage them, and in many cases pressure them to look at renewables, to change their game.

And where I'm really excited on this front is in the area of startups because, you know, startups across the nation are doing some really exciting things to deliver, usher in a whole new era of what it means to be renewable, to be less of a carbon footprint in the business. So, you know, particularly where we sit today, and we can talk about Ukraine and the impacts on this conversation we're having now in the future, I've really always said we need to celebrate progress, not perfection.

Asahi Pompey: You mentioned Ukraine. And just wanted to stay here for a minute in terms of what we're all seeing in terms of the war and how ESG as we think about climate, energy, oil, your sense of that.

Jean Case: I think a lot of people knew that countries around the world were taking advantage of Russian energy.

I don't think they knew necessarily that Russia was the largest wheat producer. Right? Which is food supply. So, we are in a war here. There are sanctions. I think there are a lot of questions around what we do to basically get through this gap so that we can reduce the reliance on Russia and what it provides to the world, but not create a humanitarian crisis in its own right around, you know, lack of needed energy or lack of needed food.

And so, I tend to think the real point of ESG is risk mitigation in the long term because the reason environmental factors need to be measured, they will impact your business and they will impact your communities. And as investors, we want to always see this mitigation of threats out there.

So, I think that the downside of what we may go through given the Ukraine crisis is that in the short term you're actually hearing calls, even from our president, for more drilling to meet the need so that we can reduce our reliance on Russia. Right? It doesn't change what the long-term solution is. The long-term solution has to be more renewables.

So, you know, in some ways I think it speeds up the need for a renewable focus. And we recognize-- and that's a good thing, right? It will pull forward a lot of investment in renewable.

Asahi Pompey: What's the greatest opportunity for impact investing right now? Are investors better off looking at innovative companies that are trying to solve 21st century problems like alternative energy? Or more established companies?

Jean Case: Well, remember, there are different classes of investors. If you're going to talk to the retail investors, you kind of need to talk to them about things they can actually invest in. So, those would put you mostly in public company and various funds that can take retail investors into public companies.

You know, as I said before, I think the most exciting space is actually in new companies. You know, one of them I love to talk about is AppHarvest. And AppHarvest is in coal country of Kentucky. So, think about sort of what we think

about when we think about coal country.

But what it is is it is vertical farming. So, they are using pretty much a greenhouse approach to grow vegetables. At scale. And in so doing, they use 90 percent less water in the product of those vegetables and have a 30X yield per acre. And most importantly, they're accessible to 80 percent of the US population in a one-day drive. Why does that matter? Well, now you're not needing boats or planes or, you know, 18 wheelers going clear across the country with that carbon footprint. So, it's just a different way of thinking about how to grow food.

But we could go right down the line, right? I mean, across all sectors we are seeing such exciting innovations that point to a great future. And they all need investment.

Asahi Pompey: You mentioned AOL. And I wanted to talk with you about that because I think it ties into diversity and what we're seeing right now. So, during your time at AOL, you were one of only two women executives. And while representation has certainly improved, we've come a long way since, of the more than 2000 companies

that have gone public in the US between 2013 and 2020, only 18 of them were led by a female founder or CEO. And right now, there are only 23 female CEOs of the global fortune 500. So, question for you. What needs to change on that D that you mentioned before about inserting from a diversity perspective to really see change from when you were one of two to now?

Jean Case: Yeah. And let me add some more data that I'm sure some of you have heard before. And that is female-led enterprises outperform, a higher return on capital, and in many cases, and this is not some lefty-- you know, this is Deloitte. This is McKinsey reporting out of this. Those are the same companies that a big company would hire to say, "Tell us what we need to know."

And yet, I've literally sat in rooms where we've talked about that. And somehow that data is just rejected like, "Okay, I know they say that there and I know I use them for everything else, but in this case I'm just not sure I'm buying the data." It's really remarkable to watch.

So, there's a tremendous amount of, I think, bias that we

have to overcome eventually. But in the very near term, you know, I think there is a focus on building more of a pipeline and providing more opportunities. But I feel very encouraged. I really do. I think the world is changing. I see progress in places. We are nowhere close to where we need to be. But at some point, I do think the data matters. And at some point, I do think enough young women will be able to see women ahead of them doing the kinds of jobs that they can dream about whereas for too long if you wanted to be a corporate CEO, the only vision was men.

And I will tell you kind of a funny story from a campaign we led at the Case Foundation which was called Faces of Founders. And so, we were planning this kind of initiative to put a focus on diverse founders to show that they're out there in every background and doing exciting things.

So, we're in a conference room together and we said, "Well, let's just Google entrepreneur." And so, we did. And we brought up images. And the entire page was white men. Some of them were stock photos of white men. I mean, if you were buying a stock photo, at least then you could decide, okay, maybe we'll throw in a little diversity.

So, our goal in that campaign, and I do think it provided a little dent in the area that we were focused on, was to really demonstrate that there are people out there everywhere from different backgrounds doing some of the most remarkable work. And sometimes I think people just literally don't know.

Asahi Pompey: I can't have you without talking about National Geographic. I grew up with National Geographic in my household. Would just love to hear sort of the latest of what's happening there and sort of fascinating things you've learned in your time at National Geographic, which is probably a long list.

Jean Case: It is. But what I will say is this year at National Geographic, it's 134 years old. So, you might think of it as kind of like one of those stodgy, old institutions. But in fact, risk taking has been in our DNA since our founding. So, we tend to refer to ourselves as a 134-year-old startup because we are constantly working hard to disrupt ourselves, to find how to be more relevant, to be in sort of different places than we have been before.

And I'll give you an example. So, when I became chairman six years ago, we at that time, every year we bring together the really cool explorers from all over the world and they come to our headquarters, which we call base camp, and they present their work. And the year I became chairman, I reflected on who was presenting. And we serve the world. And we always have at *National Geographic*. We have, for many, have been the organization responsible for bringing the world to people that they might not have understood.

Well, I can tell you that it just didn't feel like it was the world presenting. And so, we made a commitment that we wanted our explorer classes to look like the world we live in. And we made a commitment that our exploration needs to come from the places that we're writing about, not sending Americans to some community and having them do the work or tell the story.

And I couldn't be any happier. Today, the explorer group is 51 percent female. We have over 80 countries in which we have active grants going on. That number will grow dramatically in the next year or two. And today, the

explorer class is really coming from a richly diverse world with a lot of different backgrounds.

Asahi Pompey: Where do you think the world will be on climate change by 2030?

Jean Case: Well, I referenced before, you know, there are a lot of targets for 2030. And I think they're important to stay in place for 2030. I think in this next, certainly year, we might see some disruption around some of the commitments that were made to get to 2030. But I also believe there is an acceleration, Asahi. I really do that, particularly, young founders feel, some CEOs say, "Well, we're definitely not going to get there going it alone. So, who do we need to partner with? What new things do we need to do to really begin to make some traction so that we're in alignment with 2030?"

So, I'm optimistic in the long term. I'm a little less so in the near term because I think we might see some step back in the next year because of global events around us.

Asahi Pompey: I want to ask you about leadership. A

key trait of any great leader is the ability to sort of take risks, pursue new opportunities. What's the greatest risk that you've taken that's paid off? And what's the greatest lesson that you've learned, perhaps, from one that didn't go as well?

Jean Case: Yeah. Probably the greatest risk, and I wrote about this in my book, was moving from a very good career path that I was having at GE. I was very young. I was in my twenties. And I was on a really good career trajectory at GE, which at the time was the most valuable company and really the number one company people wanted to work for. Obviously, things have changed since then. But that's what it was then. And it was a job to stand up a technology project.

So, you know, I got a call from this startup no one had ever heard of. And they asked if I would come interview. And I really believed that the startup had risk taking in its DNA. And therefore, in the world of tech, would be better poised to take risks and do some things than you can do sometimes inside of a big, established company. So, I made the leap.

But I've talked about it a lot. And I tell will you that people around me grew shrill when I told them I was leaving my job, my almost assured career path at GE to go take a risk on this startup. And of course, that startup became AOL.

So, looking back, I think that's definitely the biggest risk I ever took. And I would never change that decision looking back.

And then the biggest lesson, another thing I've written about, was in standing up an initiative when we were trying to bring clean water to ten sub-Saharan African nations. We were putting 1,000 clean water wells around using this device that was like a merry-go-round. And the initiative was very high profile. And it started to fail.

And making the decision to pull the plug on it versus something the course was, for me, by far the biggest sort of public outing of a failure on my part. I wrote about it. But what I learned there was sometimes the best way forward is not to continue on the path that you're on but find a different path.

But I learned a lot of lessons. And I took the time to fail forward off of that. I felt we hadn't stayed close enough to community. I felt I had, you know, underestimated what it means to manage something 8,000 miles away. I could go right down the list. The good news is, you know, I was better off coming out of that. We were able to serve many of those communities coming out of that just with different interventions.

Asahi Pompey: Yeah. It's great to sort of watch the dialogue on failure really evolve over the last several years. You know? Sort of fail fast and failing forward. I think it's just a good omen in general around where the world needs to go in terms of understanding that success comes through failure in very many regards.

Jean Case: I often say to organizations, where are you in this conversation? Is there a clear understanding of where you're given license to try something that may fail? Or not?

Asahi Pompey: Or not.

Jean Case: And I think teams need to discuss it.

Companies need of the discuss it. Teams need to know, you know, are you going to let me kind of push that envelope so I might try something new that could be a game changer? But it could fail because it hasn't been done before.

Asahi Pompey: Well, with that, I want to say thank you. This has been a fascinating discussion and a range of topics. We really appreciate it, Jean. Thank you so much.

Jean Case: Great to be back. Thank you everyone.

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