

# Project aims to close gender gap in public discourse



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by Shari Graydon (published in the *Victoria Times Colonist* 17 January 2010)

Even before my short-lived plunge into BC political waters as press secretary to premier, Ujjal Dosanjh, I'd survived the kind of name-calling most people imagine being strictly reserved for terrorists or puppy mill operators. As a weekly newspaper columnist during the mid-1990s, my mild musings on questionable polls and the peculiar sizing practices of women's clothing manufacturers had earned me hate mail addressed to "bitch of the year".

I reflected on this recently when learning that even in 2010, men's perspectives on newspaper commentary pages outnumber women's by a margin of three to one, a ratio that some editors say reflects the relative lack of submissions from women.

Reluctance to become a target of criticism remains an issue for some women, but lack of time is another factor. Women still shoulder more caregiving responsibilities than their male counterparts, and are more apt to be CEOs of small, rather than large enterprises. So even a female expert not squeezed by sandwich generation duties is less likely to have access to the resources that would support her in crafting a well-written argument based on her area of expertise.

But there's another dynamic at play. Women are also more inclined than men to discount their expertise. I once invited dozens of female experts from a wide range of fields to be listed in a directory for reporters. A depressingly large number of them demurred, saying, "I'm really not the *best* person." Journalists tell me that this kind of confession rarely emerges from the mouths of their male sources.

As a result, news media seeking qualified commentary – either on the op ed pages, or in the context of a particular story – reflect a chronic gender imbalance. And the absence of women’s voices means that their good ideas are less likely to be heard and their leadership is less likely to be noticed. And that’s a problem – not just for women, but for society as a whole.

It’s never made sense to access only the intelligence and insights of half the population, and now, when more women graduate from universities than men, it makes even less sense. Ignoring the informed opinions of women has significant implications for the health of our democracy and the quality of our governance. The challenges we face – environmental, economic, social, cultural – have never been so great, and we need the best public policy and the most informed decisions we can possibly get.

This is the impetus behind Informed Opinions – a new initiative designed to support more knowledgeable women in contributing their perspectives, priorities and perceptions to public discourse. In partnership with universities and news outlets, the project delivers skill-building workshops to female experts and connects them with key news editors. The goal is to not only broaden the diversity of voices in the media, but to enhance Canada’s competitiveness in the process.

Research from around the world makes clear that social equality translates into economic prosperity. When women are educated and contributing their skills and knowledge in all arenas, the entire society benefits. Canada is already testimony to that. But the chronic under-representation of women’s perspectives – both in government and in the news media – continues to limit our capacity to address complex issues.

In 2007 McKinsey & Company found that companies with women as well as men in senior management positions perform better financially than organizations where all senior managers are male. It’s not a big stretch to assume that our contribution to public discourse would also have a positive impact on Canada’s performance on a broad range of indicators.

At a time when traditional newsgathering models are struggling to maintain their advertising base and compete with electronic and digital media, an expanded pool of expert sources can't help but be welcome. And who knows? Maybe the increase in women's perspectives will make female commentators less likely to be targeted with gender slurs.

*Ottawa-based author Shari Graydon is delivering a public lecture about Informed Opinions on Monday January 25<sup>th</sup> at 12 noon at the University of Victoria in room 157 at the Faculty of Law (Fraser) building. For more information, contact Maneesha Dekha at [mdeckha@uvic.ca](mailto:mdeckha@uvic.ca)*