

Women must speak up and make Canada better

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I was cutting across the parking lot of St. Patrick's Basilica in Montreal on my way to the old port the day Pope John Paul II died in 2005. A TV reporter stopped me to ask if I would comment. Of course I declined. Fortunately for the news crew, the love of my life was happy to oblige. I walked out of the camera's range and turned back to observe him drop his pearls of wisdom.

"It's a very sad day for Catholics everywhere," he said simply.

Well yes, I thought. And then, but wouldn't it be nice if the new pope were willing to recognize the devastation on women's lives wrought by Catholic policies against contraception?

I think of this incident often these days, working on a project that's supporting women in saying yes to media interviews and submit their commentary to pages like this one: the newspaper's vehicle for showcasing informed opinions of community members able to provide context for the news and insight into issues that deserve more attention. Editors I've spoken with in the past 18 months about this matter have all confirmed what's regrettably apparent from reading their pages: the ratio of commentary submissions from men typically outnumber those from women by a factor of 4.

Just to be clear, I'm frequently engaged, provoked and enlightened by op eds written by men. But women make up 52% of the population, more than 60% of university graduates and now work in virtually all fields. They also experience many aspects of life very differently than men and often have unique insights as a result. I think we'd all benefit from hearing more from them – and research into corporate performance and national competitiveness supports this view.

Over the past year, I've spoken about this issue with dozens of highly qualified women.

Their expertise has ranged from medical imaging technology and religious education systems to the social impacts of disasters and the human rights abuses of mining companies. Despite their demonstrated knowledge and belief that news media in a healthy democracy must reflect a broad diversity of informed perspectives, few have ever written an op ed, and many routinely decline journalists' interview requests.

Most plead a lack of time as the obstacle to their greater participation, and I understand this. Although there are exceptions, women who work full time continue to bear greater responsibility on the home front than men, shouldering more child and elder care responsibilities, more domestic duties and more of the community volunteer load.

In fact, one of the anecdotes I share with them acknowledges this very challenge. In the early 1990s, my daily newspaper ran a story beneath the headline, "Men's work worth more than women's, stats show." Well, duh, I thought: that's old news, isn't it? Doesn't everyone already know that women only earn 76 cents on the dollar compared to men?

I read the article anyway, curious to see what new development justified its existence. I discovered the story was really about the fact that women's unpaid labour was worth 40% of Canada's gross domestic product. This struck me as a much more salient point, and not just because I'm female. A more accurate headline might have included the reference to our GDP; a more arresting one could have noted "Canada's economy would tank without women's unpaid labour".

The headline writers working at the paper at the time were all male. But I'm certain that giving a woman ten minutes to read the story and come up with an engaging alternative to fit the available space would have delivered something closer to my option than the original. And the relative absence of women's voices on the op ed pages reflects a similarly unbalanced and much less interesting and informative picture than it might.

Women who attend my workshops have expressed interest in arguing that indigenous languages are a part of all Canadians' cultural heritage; that the HST will actually benefit British Columbians; that animals' legal status as property makes it difficult to protect

them; and that a simple change to drivers' license renewals is all that's needed to increase transplant donors and save lives. I'm eager to read all of these perspectives, and struck by the diversity and relevance of the topics that come up.

Canada would be a better, more dynamic and enlightened place if we made more space for women's voices – on op ed pages, at boardroom tables, in elected office. And as a first step, women themselves need to start speaking up more often – *everyday* of the year.

Shari Graydon is a frequent commentator on women and the media and the catalyst for Informed Opinions. She'll be delivering a public lecture on The Top 7 Reasons Smart Women Should Speak Up at SFU's Harbour Centre at 7 pm on March 7th, followed by a panel discussion featuring Vancouver Sun Editor, Daphne Bramham and SFU professor Kathleen Cross.) For more information, visit www.informedopinions.org