

Why we need more women in the media

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You probably didn't notice, but in newspapers and newscasts across North America recently the number of references to women went up, along with the amount of ink and air time given to exploring how they think and what influences their decisions.

You can thank Janay Rice for this, though she lamented her sudden status as the poster woman for domestic abuse, courtesy of her husband [Ray Rice's knockout punch](#). But her willingness to marry him shortly after his video-documented assault gave columnists everywhere a reason to focus attention on an issue that's both depressingly commonplace and mostly ignored the rest of the time.

That attention is key to answering the \$7.4-billion question (what Statistics Canada estimates violence against women costs our economy every year). Which is, it must be repeated, not "why did she stay?" but "why does he hit?" or "why don't we do a better job of stopping the abuse in the first place?"

Complex issues require complex solutions, of course, but what if, at very least, we ensured that women's voices were an integral part of every important conversation we have about anything that has an impact on their world? Seemingly too obvious to state, this remains demonstrably alien to how we operate.

Consider public discourse: despite the fact that women constitute roughly half the population and workforce — and more than 60 per cent of university grads — in Canada's most influential print, broadcast and online news media, male voices outnumber female voices by a factor of four to one.

To be sure, men still dominate many spheres of politics, business and science, so it's predictable that more of the officials, CEOs and experts whose opinions are sought by journalists would be male. But women lead in education, many health-care professions

and the non-profit sector — arenas that affect us all and arguably deserve more attention.

As importantly, women's life experiences are often profoundly different than men's, informing perspectives and priorities that aren't effectively represented by male-supplied context and analysis.

Last year, my organization, [Informed Opinions](#), conducted a little experiment that proved this assertion.

We train women experts to share their ideas through media commentary. Curious to know what difference their voices make in terms of focus and content, we created a word cloud from the first 100 published opinion pieces written by our workshop participants, and compared it to the most prominent words generated by a similar sampling of op-eds written by male experts.

The clouds contained many similar words — Canadian, government, health, political, public, work — but the phrases that appeared prominently only in women-penned pieces tellingly included: abuse, assault, benefit, care, children, equality, families, girls, help, justice, services, sexual, support, treatment, violence and women.

Notice how present Janay Rice's reality is in that list? It's not surprising, really, that people who are more economically and physically vulnerable might sometimes be preoccupied by related issues, and inclined to write about them when given the chance.

But drawing attention to such realities is not the only reason we should be striving for greater gender equity in public discourse. Given the complex social, economic and environmental challenges we face, we desperately need the ideas and insights that flow from a set of perspectives that is as diverse as possible. And over the past 20 years, a growing body of research has made clear the significant benefits resulting from gender diversity in business and science alike.

Fortune 500 companies with the most women serving on boards of directors financially

outperform companies with the fewest, delivering better sales results and higher returns on investment. Gender-diverse boards have also been shown to exercise more corporate monitoring, increase participation in decision-making and reduce groupthink.

At a time when innovation is recognized as a key competitive advantage, you would think that the increase in a group's collective intelligence attributed to the inclusion of women would be sufficient incentive for organizations in all sectors to work harder at soliciting female participation.

And news media should be leading the way. Not only because they exert enormous influence in terms of visible role-modelling, but because in an age of dwindling ad revenues, fragmenting audiences and a generational reluctance to pay for content, the ability to attract readers and viewers is more competitive than ever. Women make up more than half of the prospective audience and are responsible for the vast majority of consumer spending. Doing a better job at reflecting their realities should be a no-brainer.

An obvious side benefit will be our enhanced ability not only to ask the right questions, but to answer them, too.

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