

Gender inequality isn't a “women’s issue”

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Ottawa residents scanning recent headlines could be forgiven for thinking they live in a post-feminist age: France’s Christine Lagarde is now managing director of the International Monetary Fund; German Chancellor Angela Merkel is deemed one of the most influential women in the world; and even Thailand has just elected its first ever female Prime Minister in Yingluck Shinawatra.

But behind each of those headlines lie more sobering reminders: that the infinitely qualified Lagarde attained her position due to the allegations of sexual assault against her male predecessor; that gender stereotypes remain so ingrained in Germany that women’s workforce participation is declining; and that Thailand remains a known destination for child sex tourism.

Here at home, although the recent ascension of an unprecedented three female leaders to the rank of premier has been greeted as groundbreaking, and our newly elected federal parliament is now one-quarter female, women’s representation at all levels of politics remains well under the 30 per cent threshold believed to provide sufficient critical mass to auger significant changes to public policy.

So when more than 1,800 delegates from 84 countries assemble in Ottawa this week at the 11th incarnation of the Women’s Worlds conference, there will be no shortage of pressing issues to discuss. And the titles of the plenaries and panels underline how much is at stake: from “Sex Trafficking of Women and Children” to “How Peacebuilding Undermines Women’s Rights in Afghanistan”, participants will be talking about what are often life and death situations for those affected.

In keeping with the conference’s focus on inclusion, the delegates and speakers reflect an astonishingly broad crosssection of women; in addition to their geographic, racial, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, they represent researchers, activists, policy-

makers and advocates. This reflects the recognition by co-hosts Carleton University and the University of Ottawa that genuine progress comes when theory and research are married to pragmatism and practice.

But there's a bigger piece missing here, no fault of the hardworking conference organizers and dedicated participants. And that's the very notion – unspoken but pervasive – that responsibility for many of the issues being discussed is appropriately relegated to women.

The very term “women’s issues” has often been misused to imply that some things ought not be spoken about in mixed company that naturally, men would have neither interest in, nor accountability for addressing problems that only, or mostly, affect women. Or that the intractable problems themselves are just part of the territory when you have the misfortune to be born short of a y chromosome.

But the world doesn’t operate on a two-solitudes basis: men and women are in it together – from perpetuating the species and building healthy communities to saving the planet we live on. And as a growing body of international research makes clear, when women are protected from violence and exploitation, when they’re educated and welcomed as equals, when their skills and contributions are fully integrated into the societies in which they live, everyone benefits: women themselves, of course; their children, not surprisingly; and, yes, even men and the broader community.

The inspirational women speaking at Women’s Worlds 2011 – such as Ecuador’s Monica Chuji Gulinga, who chairs her country’s Constituent Assembly Committee on Natural Resources and Biodiversity, and American Cherokee Andrea Smith, who teaches at the University of California and co-founded an anti-violence initiative – know this truth in a deep way, from daily lived experience. As do the hundreds of other women who will be sharing their expertise and hard-fought lessons on everything from microfinance, cooperative entrepreneurship and conflict resolution to effective lobbying, grassroots organizing and indigenous healing.

I have no doubt that the conference, expected to be the largest gathering of its kind in Canadian history, will achieve its stated objectives of strengthening connections and providing greater opportunities for collaboration among researchers, activists and policy-makers from around the world.

But I also imagine how much more might be achieved if all the countries represented in Ottawa this week – including Canada – were to more actively harness the insights and analyses and better apply the collective wisdom and experience against the specific challenges that Women's World participants are seeking to address: problems such as poverty, food insecurity and homelessness, pornography, sex trafficking and war rape, to name just a few.

Because at root, these are all challenges – or crimes – of equality. They are symptoms of the bigger issue: the ongoing disenfranchisement of a shocking percentage of the world's women. And every government that's not investing significant resources in righting that wrong is negligent, short-sighted and failing to nurture its nation's true capacity.

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