


CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

# Increasing women's voices is key to accelerating action on climate change

By **Shari Graydon** Contributor

Fri., Feb. 21, 2020 |  3 min. read

You know that theory suggesting that women are given a chance to lead political parties or General Motors only when the situation is so bad no sane man wants the job?

What's been keeping me up at night is the fear that we may be living that trajectory on a planetary scale. What if we wait for those in power to make room for women's leadership, and by the time they do, it will be too late?

Consider recent research analyzing the number of years it would likely take to reach gender parity in various arenas. A [2017 study](#) calculated that bridging the wage gap and achieving 50 per cent of women in electoral politics in Canada was another three decades away. (That was the good news. Attaining parity in managerial positions and STEM education was estimated at "never.")

But even the 30-year time frame is terrifying in light of the escalating impacts of climate change and the failure of leaders around the world to act with the urgency advocated by the scientists who understand what's going on.

Here's my concern: I don't believe it's possible for enough of the people in charge to overcome centuries of socialization reinforcing the notion that leadership is defined by certainty, risk-taking, competitiveness and individual achievement, as quickly as the situation demands. For humankind to survive this moment, we need to ensure the decisions being made are informed by diverse perspectives and experiences, as well as evidence and a commitment to collective well-being.

It's old news that women pay greater attention to relationships and the challenges of balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders. [Research](#) finds that female corporate directors are more likely to take a cooperative approach in pursuit of a fair and moral outcome benefiting all parties.

Add to that the evidence around women's tendency to [avoid unhealthy risk](#) – an inclination that could have prevented the 2008 global financial collapse. Even having a single female director on a board can cut the chances of bankruptcy by 20 per cent.

We have never lived in a world more desperate for these measures. Incorporating more women at senior levels is essential to address the existential environmental threats we face.

This is not to say that some male leaders aren't focused on the peril. In recent weeks, two respected executives used their platforms to explicitly advocate for the environment.

Mark Carney, outgoing governor of the Bank of England, highlighted his intention to focus on the climate crisis. And Larry Fink, CEO of Blackrock, announced his company will privilege environmental sustainability in its investment decisions.

Their leadership is welcome. But to ensure that corporations and governments act with the urgency the moment requires, a critical mass of women is necessary in every organization and arena – including public discourse.

Because news media help to set agendas and shape policy, the voices they amplify wield outsized influence. That's why it's important to measure whose voices are amplified. Last November we examined the opinion hubs of three major online national news platforms, measuring the ratio of male and female voices published in a one-month period.

We found that relative to data gathered in 2013, all three significantly improved the percentage of commentaries written by women.

The Toronto Star's ratio increased from 15 per cent to 35 per cent; the Globe and Mail's from 23 to 31 per cent; and the Ottawa Citizen's from 26 to 42 per cent.

However, in terms of regular contributors, female columnists made up only 24 per cent at the Globe and a mere 12 per cent at the Citizen. In contrast, 57 per cent of Star columnists were female.

As a result, the Star's overall ratio of female voices for all opinion commentary, both columns and op eds, was 48 per cent. We hope this exemplary performance inspires the Globe and Citizen — at 29 and 25 per cent respectively — to try harder in their own efforts to reflect reality.

A hockey coach wouldn't think of populating a team with only offensive players. An effective CEO knows she needs bean counters *and* innovators. And visionary politicians need nimble and effective public servants to implement their agendas.

So when we're staring at a doomsday clock sitting at less than two minutes to midnight, incorporating women's insights into every important conversation and decision we make is mission critical.

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*Shari Graydon is the Catalyst of [Informed Opinions](#), a non-profit working to bridge the gender gap in Canadian public discourse, and a Women of Influence 2020 honouree.*

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