

Speech: It's raining men: gender diversity and climate change

Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency – Women's Engineering Society Centenary Conference – 15 March 2019

It's raining men.

Hallelujah.

It's raining men.

–

Engineers are on the front line of protecting humanity from the impacts of climate change.

Unfortunately – (unlike in the song by The Weather Girls) – for women working in engineering, “tonight” probably doesn't feel like “the first time in history it's gonna start raining men”.

And that's just one of the reasons why the Women's Engineering Society is a vital organisation.

–

It's a privilege to be asked to speak on your centenary.

But, we still need “Deeds Not Words” so I will be brief.

–

One hundred years on and only 11% of the engineering sector are women.

That is not a women's issue.

The whole of society is missing out on much needed talent.

So, what can we do about it?

–

In November, Penny Mordaunt – Secretary of State for International Development and Minister for Women and Equalities – announced the Government Equalities Office is moving into the Cabinet Office.

She said: “My vision for GEO is that we're the catalysts across government, amplifying and lending weight to the excellent work already underway in so many departments, and also across the country.”

Placing equalities at the centre of government sends a message that diversity

and inclusion are priorities for every department.

And, it provides a hub to join up the public sector with the business community.

We can use that.

–

I've spent over 25 years working in finance.

In 2010, I helped set up the 30% Club, and now support them as an advisor.

Last year, we reached our goal of a minimum 30% female representation on FTSE 100 boards.

We are now campaigning for 30% women on FTSE 350 boards – and 30% women at senior management level of FTSE 100 companies – by 2020.

–

In order to make change you need to beware the echo chamber.

Because the overwhelming majority of Chairs and Chief Executives are men, we need to work with those decision makers to champion female leadership.

–

The 30% Club offers cross-sector mentoring to women at every level of their careers.

Mentors are leaders, both men and women, with substantial business experience.

We aim to help women get through the danger zone where the career paths of men and women diverge – and help them go on to realise their potential.

Please take advantage of this.

–

The data shows that organisations who embrace gender diversity get better financial results and environmental outcomes.

Boardrooms who limit themselves to 50% of the available talent will always fail to understand 100% of their customers.

In the era of #MeToo, diversity and inclusion helps businesses stay one step ahead of competitors.

Investors who engage corporate boards on their diversity policies are showing sound financial judgment.

–

At the Environment Agency, roughly 15% of our engineers are women.

Our target is least 30% by 2030.

We run 4 recruitment initiatives annually and we're aiming for 50% women in these.

–

To meet targets you need metrics.

We publish pay gap data on average earnings for differences in disability, race, religion and belief and sexual orientation, as well as gender.

We've got a long way to go but high quality data on the drivers of pay gaps will help us improve action.

–

We know that one of the biggest challenges is encouraging girls to choose the right subjects at school – something everybody has a role in changing.

Beyond school, the Environment Agency funds engineering courses at Brunel University, and we offer apprenticeships working in our Field Operations teams.

Our new 'Water Environment Worker' Apprenticeship will open in the summer.

Our full time staff can enrol on a whole range of apprenticeships, helping them develop throughout their careers.

–

Ayo Sokale – a graduate civil engineer at the Environment Agency – is a member of the prestigious Institution of Civil Engineers' President's Future Leader scheme, where she is working towards her Chartered Engineer professional accreditation.

The Environment Agency's Women's Network – made up of over 2,300 women and men – works to 'encourage, enable and equip women to achieve their full potential in the workplace'.

Our Executive Director for Flood and Coast, John Curtin, has made the panel pledge and will no longer appear on all male panels at events and conferences.

Last year, my colleague Clare Dinnis launched the FCERM Women's Network to connect professionals working in flood and coastal erosion risk management.

This is already making a difference to the confidence of women in the wide range of disciplines which support engineering.

It's important to celebrate action and progress when you can.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says there are only 11 years before significant impacts – like storms, heatwaves, and floods – reach dangerous tipping points.

That's just 11 years before natural forces threaten the safety of communities and the stability of economies to a greater extent than ever before.

At the same time, there is a skills gap in engineering and there aren't enough people – men or women – pursuing the careers needed to fill it.

We need to take practical steps to change that. As William Wordsworth wrote:

“Not in Utopia, subterranean fields, Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where! But in the very world, which is the world Of all of us, – the place where in the end We find our happiness, or not at all!”

–

The infrastructure which will shape the real lives of men and women through the worsening impacts of climate change is currently being created by a sector with only 11% women.

That is insidious.

But, we can be optimistic.

Everybody here today has the power to do something that helps engineering become more diverse and inclusive.

And – as engineers – everybody here today has the power to help realise the possibilities and opportunities for people, businesses, governments, and the natural world – that can be unlocked by humanity's efforts to manage climate change.

–

Women need to do more than be the change we want to see in the world – we must also design the world we want to see.

–

I wish the Women's Engineering Society – and all engineers – every success for the next 100 years.

Thank you very much.