

The role of women in managing climate change

Here we are in Canary Wharf overlooking the incredible Thames Barrier which – just this morning – closed for the two hundredth time.

The Barrier was opened in 1982 – and was expected to last until 2030.

A marvel of adaptation, it will now protect London until 2070 – 100 years after it was designed – because the embankment foundations were built to allow them to be raised.

But, I'm not here to talk about engineering.

Tonight is about the role of women in managing climate change.

Female leadership in local, national and international policy making is vital.

If you are someone who wants to take climate action, I expect you would want to learn from those who are already delivering results.

But, as I will explain, women have to shout louder than men to be heard.

And, in an emergency this is a game-changing mistake.

With the climate emergency accelerating, it is in no one's interest to run this extra compound risk.

Men and women alike should demand change.

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Last autumn, I was a judge on the Woman's Hour Power List.

The theme was "Our Planet".

Woman's Hour said: "Our planet is a home for us all. But globally, women are on the frontline when it comes to the consequences of environmental change.

"They are the people most likely to collect water, food and fuel – all of which are becoming scarcer or more expensive. Women are also more likely to face poverty and financial insecurity, making them less able to adapt to a changing world.

"This list aims to recognise and champion the women who are doing something about these issues."

We received the largest ever number of nominations for a Woman's Hour Power List.

We wanted to make sure that every woman listening to the programme would recognise the people and their achievements as within reach.

We don't hear about such women in the media enough.

In 2017, the company Lissted carried out analysis to find out why British female political journalists are less influential on social media than men.

It showed there wasn't a single female voice in the top ten British political influencers on Twitter during the 2017 general election campaign.

Consider that – by that point – Laura Kuenssberg had been the BBC's political editor for two years.

There was an outcry from female politicians, but when their Twitter feeds were analysed, they found they too were not profiling women's voices.

The journalist Mary Ann Seighart wrote about this in the New Statesman.

She said:

“If men's voices are heard more often and spread more widely than women's, then our political conversation is being distorted and women's views are being drowned out.”

Just this month, on her blog, Luba Kassova – the author of “The Missing Perspectives of Women in News”, commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – points to analysis, by AKAS, of global online news between 2017 and now.

Women have held just 28 percent of the share of voice in news articles about climate change.

She said: “In fact, women's share of voice peaked at 31 percent in 2019, but has been creeping down ever since. Yet again, we are seeing women's visibility hit an invisible ceiling at under a third of all the voices out there.”

Given the roll call of brilliant women working on the biggest story of our lifetimes, I find this extraordinary.

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At the end of “Invisible Women”, Caroline Criado Perez writes that after a climate disaster – like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, or Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico – relief workers are usually portrayed in the media as muscular and masculine.

Of course, it is right to celebrate the heroism of the guys in the pictures...

But, Caroline quotes Adi Martinez-Roman – an executive director for a non-profit helping low-income families – who said:

“The reality is that when you go to communities, mostly it is women as

leaders and as community organisers.”

She talks about women who wade into flooded communities, raise money and rebuild roads.

She talks about women who have distributed “solar-powered lights, generators, gas, clothes, shoes, tampons, batteries medication, mattresses [and] water.”

This is a key part of what we talk about when we talk about managing climate change.

As we build infrastructure to better protect people from floods and heatwaves...

People also need to be better prepared to move on from climate shocks with the minimum disruption.

This quick recovery time is crucial to a well-functioning economy.

The women who help communities build back better have skills, expertise and leadership experience we all need.

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Ahead of a visit to Manchester on Monday, I learned about a group called Community Savers that is learning from the approaches of the women-led movement Slum Dwellers International.

Both groups help low income women – often the most active at a community level, but with limited influence over local decision-making – to come together.

As well as running weekly savings meetings and monthly markets, they worked with residents to create a women-friendly free meeting space, and a food membership club.

This increases resilience when residents are hit by shocks or stresses, whether these are personal and domestic – or climate impacts.

The partnership of Community Savers and Slum Dwellers International shows people in the global north and south have a lot to learn from each other.

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Building on her observations about women’s voices, Mary Ann Seighart recently published a book called: “The Authority Gap: Why Women are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and what We Can Do about it”.

It shows how all of our personal and professional lives would be much more fulfilling if we allowed women equality of ambition, expertise and success.

On the climate, Mary Ann writes this:

“Women are more likely to worry about climate change and to believe that it

will harm future generations. They are also more likely to believe that it will affect them personally. So having more women in positions of decision-making power, with people listening to them, would help to reduce global warming.”

An upcoming report – “The Climate Action Gender Gap” – from the 30% Club and the Oliver Wyman Forum, shows companies can get ahead in the race to net zero by actively considering women in three roles:

1 . As leaders

Women in leadership positions are often more open than men to changes that will drive climate action but are currently underrepresented in decision-making positions, especially in carbon-intensive industries.

2 . As investors

Women have a stronger preference than men for investing that prioritizes environmental, social, and corporate governance factors.

3 . As Influencers

Women make a large proportion of household purchase decisions in areas that generate high emissions, such as food, travel, and energy. They are also more likely on average than men to change their habits in ways that contribute to emissions reduction.

Interestingly, the report also says that according to one study of 130 countries, women in government positions are more likely to sign on to international treaties to reduce global warming than men.

It concludes:

“In the end, companies that are good at diversity are likely to be good at climate action. Those that combine the two will find they are in a better position than others to do business in a low-carbon economy.”

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

Real progress on diversity will be made not by “fixing the women” or “beating up the men”, but through men and women working together to improve business culture and achieve more diversity of thought at all company levels.

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So let’s explore business culture – and as we are at Clifford Chance – I would like to briefly talk about environmental law.

The ambitions of COP26 will be held back unless there is strong regulation to underpin them.

Ambition creates opportunity, but rules give everyone clarity, consistency

and certainty.

Well-funded regulators can provide investors with data about which companies are performing well and which aren't.

But, they also need to ensure that crime doesn't pay.

Sanctions for environmental crimes must pose a threat.

This year, the Environment Agency's £90 million fine against Southern Water for deliberate pollution, potentially shifted the dial on the levels of penalties for corporate environmental crime in England.

I would like to see the courts apply sanctions consistently and proportionately.

With the most serious breaches by very large companies attracting sanctions based on a percentage of turnover.

More attention should be paid to the directors of companies that are guilty of repeated, deliberate or reckless breaches of environmental law.

It is a failing of the current system that some people can move from company to company, without fear of recrimination.

Such directors should be struck off – and in the most grievous cases, custodial sentences are right.

However, despite constant refinement of regulatory enforcement, it remains the case that some people are getting rich while the environment pays the price.

Society-wide change depends not just on deterrence actions but also a change in corporate culture under pressure from shareholders.

The Environment Agency has huge oversight of many sectors in the UK.

Perhaps, we could start to think about giving not just shareholders but also insurers and lenders a fuller picture of how the companies are actually performing on the ground.

A decade on from the financial crisis, and many investors still do not fully understand the esoteric financial products their money is tied up in, let alone how their investments connect to environmental degradation.

Environmental regulators need to keep in lockstep with economic and financial regulators, ensuring that everyone is clear about the required pace of action.

To deliver the vision of COP26 the world needs strong green regulation.

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In December, I put my name to an open letter from the campaign group "She

Changes Climate”, calling for 50:50 balance of women at COP26 and all future COPs.

The letter says:

“Women and girls more often face the brunt of climate related disasters than men. They are the ‘shock absorbers’ of climate change: impacts disproportionately hit their livelihoods and food security, drive up levels of the violence they experience, and hold them back from engaging in education and the green economy.

“For their interests to be appropriately considered in climate change policy responses, women need to be involved in strategic planning and decision-making.”

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On Tuesday, I attended the UK’s Global Investment Summit at the Science Museum, where global business leaders, Secretaries of State and the Prime Minister spoke about sustainable investment.

You will find the speaker list published on Gov.uk.

Of the 30 speakers listed 15 were men, 15 were women.

So, we know what gender balance looks like.

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The UN Secretary General António Guterres has said:

“Women’s equality is essentially a question of power. We must urgently transform our male-dominated world and shift the balance of power, to solve the most challenging problems of our age.

“That means more women leaders in parliaments, cabinets and board rooms. It means women fully represented and making their full contribution, everywhere.”

Recently, a lot of people have described COP26 as our “last best chance” to save the planet.

But, maybe it would be helpful to imagine it is our “first good chance” to save the planet.

COP26 must deliver real action for everyone in the world – at least 50 percent of whom, are women.

As the former Irish President Mary Robinson said:

“Climate change is a man-made problem and must have a feminist solution.”

Thank you very much.