

Call in the women

A critical mass of female voices changes the tenor of political and corporate decisions — and should be used to galvanize climate policy, says **Susan Buckingham**.

In 1992, the United Nations called for women to be engaged in environmental decision-making at all levels. This was on the grounds of human rights and justice, and because of their distinctive experiences of childbirth, caring for vulnerable family members, unpaid or undervalued work and subsistence food production. These experiences often expose women to environmental problems in ways that are more direct and harsher than for men — for example, women suffer disproportionately from indoor air pollution in countries that use biofuels for cooking and heating.

Even in the developed world, women are still more likely to be involved with household tasks, from cleaning and grocery shopping to bill paying, in which environmental issues can be a direct concern. Such different experiences may lie behind different attitudes that men and women, on average, have to environmental issues. A 2009 Eurobarometer survey on behalf of the European Commission and European Parliament showed that men were more likely to think that carbon dioxide emissions have only a marginal effect on climate change (33% versus 29% for women), and that the seriousness of climate change has been exaggerated (31% versus 25% for women)¹.

The current landscape of industries, governments and other bodies with a say in climate-change issues — including transport, energy, waste management, architecture and city planning — is predominantly male. In the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), only 5 of the 31 chairs, co-chairs and vice-chairs are women. Perhaps surprisingly, this dearth of female faces extends to non-governmental organizations and campaign groups. In my eight years as chair of the UK-based Women's Environmental Network, I was struck by the machismo of much of the environmental campaigning sector.

Almost two decades on from that UN call, women's views are still not being heard where they count. This is more than unjust: it is a missed opportunity, given the political deadlock over addressing global warming. Although it is difficult to prove a connection between gender balance and decision-making, or to pinpoint causation, there are signs that a critical mass of women is linked to more progressive and positive outcomes. A recent study published in *Science*, for example, showed that collective intelligence rises with the number of women in a group — probably



Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

because of their increased social sensitivity².

In 2007, in a survey of gender balance at senior management level in companies, McKinsey & Company, a management consultancy in New York, found a positive and significant relationship between the employment of three or more women in every ten or so appointments and factors such as company performance in leadership, innovation, return on equity and stock price³. It is generally thought that at least 30% women is needed in a group's leadership to alter decision-making. Less than this, and the women may be drowned out, feel too intimidated to comment or have been selected because their views tend to conform to those of their male colleagues.

BETTER TOGETHER

Gender balance has also been linked with environmental decision-making. In 2003, my colleagues and I made a study of waste-management systems for the European Commission⁴. We found that the local authorities with the highest recycling rates had a higher percentage of women managers than average. They also tended to include fewer engineers and more decision-makers from diverse backgrounds, including education.

Similar trends can be seen in national carbon emissions. Out of the 70 most developed countries in the world, only 18 reduced or stabilized their overall carbon emissions between 1990 and 2004 (ref. 5). Fourteen of

these had a greater-than-average percentage of female elected representatives. Again, that doesn't prove causation, but it hints that gender balance and more sustainable decision-making may go hand in hand.

A challenge to the male dominance of the climate-change community was launched in 2007 at the Conference of the Parties to the IPCC in Bali, through the creation of the Global Gender and Climate Alliance. It aims to ensure that gender concerns are integrated into the process for negotiating climate change. In March 2010, a coalition of women's environmental groups challenged the all-male nominations to the UN's High Level Advisory Group on Climate Change Financing. One woman, Christine Lagarde, the French minister of economic affairs, industry and employment, replaced a man in the advisory group, although alone she is unlikely to be able to make significant changes. Similarly, the May 2010 appointment of Christiana Figueres, a former government minister and environmental negotiator from Costa Rica, as the new executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is encouraging, but alone it might not be enough.

Environmental consultant Candice Stevens, a former sustainable-development adviser to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, recently suggested that the "abysmally slow" progress on sustainable development might be linked to "sluggish" advances in achieving gender equality, and called for research to investigate this question⁶. More research is a good idea. But in my view, there is enough evidence now to justify increasing women's involvement in decision-making on climate change. We should do so without delay. ■

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