

Women's Leadership in Uncertain Times

Keynote Address – 2020 Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region

S. Ashleigh Weeden

Being here with you in this space with you today, in this particular moment in history, is a privilege that I don't want to waste with the typical 'keynote' comments. More than ever, it feels important to me to use whatever platform we are given not to just add more noise, but to encourage deep thinking about the work ahead. And I won't sugarcoat that work. Like the women served by Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region we must face the unfaceable, confront the unimaginable, and then keep showing up for the work.

After more than six months of ... whatever we want to call this weird, liminal space between what the world looked like in January 2020 and what we know now... it's become startlingly clear that this new decade will force us to address challenges many of us never anticipated. The public health crisis of COVID-19 and the widespread reckoning with systemic and structural racism re-ignited through the Black Lives Matter movement are happening in the shadow of the growing threat of global climate disaster. These crises have geographically and socially uneven consequences. There is no recovery from COVID-19 without social, economic and environmental justice - meaning the challenges we face are layered, complex.

Like many others, my own feelings about facing the work ahead swings wildly between a sort of chaotic hope that this time is teaching us that all of the so-called "rules" we've taken for granted are entirely *made up* and the daunting realization that even if we have reached the eye of the storm, that means that there is still more than half of the storm to come and we likely won't know the full extent of the damage done until we can clearly see the wreckage - which is still a long way out of frame.

As communities and countries around the globe seek to navigate these uncharted waters, many commentators have highlighted the remarkable way that countries and communities led by women appear to be handling the COVID-19 crisis better than their male counterparts. Jacinda Aldern in New Zealand, the coalition government led entirely by young women in Finland, Angela Merkel in Germany - all very different women, but all remarkable leaders.

Here in Canada, we have developed an admiration and celebration of the Medical Officers of Health who are guiding us through this crisis - federally, Dr. Theresa Tam, Dr. Bonnie Henry in BC, Dr. Heather Morrison in PEI, Dr. Deena Hinshaw in Alberta, among many others across all orders of government. The fact everyone knows these women by name, where six months ago we probably would have said "who?" is remarkable in and of itself. Generally, we have attributed their excellence under pressure to resilience, pragmatism, benevolence, trust in collective common sense, mutual aid and humility. While many men in power have used the language of war to talk about managing the COVID-19 crisis, it turns out an ethos of care is actually what's been most effective during these unprecedented times.

So, if these women have shown so readily how competent and professional they are, especially under circumstances and conditions that no leader has faced in at least three generations, then why is it that in the 2019 federal election, 30% of ridings had no or only one woman candidate? Why did women win just 98 of the 338 seats in the House of Commons - a depressing record high of 29% of seats.

Ontario's numbers were better - with nearly 40% of Ontario's 124 ridings represented by women, the highest of any provincial legislature in the country. However, when it comes to the top spot provincial and territorial legislatures, we have dropped from having a high of six women serving as first minister for a very brief 277 days in 2013 to now having only one - Caroline Cochrane, who took office as the 13th Premier of the Northwest Territories in 2019.

Municipally, women occupy less than 20% of mayors' positions and only 28% of councillors' seats across Canada. In 2016, the Rural Ontario Institute provided a rural municipal councillor profile that emphasized that rural communities are overwhelmingly governed by white men over 60. When we look further into the representation of Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour and LGBTQ2+ elected officials, the numbers become downright dire. You'll have to forgive me if I have a difficult time celebrating any of this as evidence of progress. Representation in political, economic, social and cultural institutions is an expression of power. Women still do not hold sufficient seats of power.

So, like many others: I'm angry. And we have to remember that there is power in righteous anger over injustice when it is channeled effectively—to paraphrase American abolition activist and advocate Mariame Kaba, this knowledge is a powerful fuel for radicalizing our leadership, rather than reducing us to despair. From Prime Minister Aldern to Dr. Tam to Autumn Pelletier's climate activism to the powerful women leading the Black Lives Matter Movement (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and others in the United States or Janaya Khan and Sandy Hudson in Toronto), we have remarkable examples of how women are channeling anger into the compelling power required to lead us through uncertain times.

To a far less extent than these amazing women, I have had the incredible good fortune to build my life and career in the weird space that exists between the kind of chaotic hope I mentioned earlier and the type of righteous anger that makes me deeply skeptical of anyone who wants me to be grateful for incremental progress when the last six months have shown us just how possible it is to make necessary, radical changes in record time. If there is a silver lining to the shocks of the last six months, it's that we have proof that, collectively, we have the absolute power to redefine the rules entirely. We get to totally flip our decision-making tables, rebuilding them into totally different configurations that don't recreate outdated power dynamics about who gets invited to sit with us, who decides on place-settings, and what will be served there. This is important work - because if we only think about 'inviting different people to the table', we are simply reinforcing that someone has the power to decide who is invited and who is not.

More than a decade of work leading and researching future-oriented rural policy and community development has shown me that no one really cares about something until it directly affects them in some way. Too often, we allow the pain of others to go unaddressed until it becomes

our own pain - whether that's in terms of our health, our wallets, or our fundamental human rights. If we are going to move forward with building a just future during whatever comes next, we're going to have to get deeply personal. I take this all very personally. I truly believe that none of us are free until all of us are free. While we can debate the best way to build infrastructure, there is no room for debate when it comes to recognizing each other's humanity. We must actively work against the dangerous encroachment of narratives that say we have to allow people in positions of power to debate and diminish the fundamental human rights and lives of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, LGBTQ2+ rights, or the merits of gender equality.

The shocks we're experiencing now did not break our social and economic systems - they have just highlighted the ways in which they were already broken. At the same time, these overlapping crises have made people and processes visible to us that, perhaps, were beyond our field of vision before. We are seeing wonderful acts of neighbourly connection, such as the new take on 'ding dong ditch' that involves leaving a secret gift on someone's porch, and the beautiful amount of community care being devoted to seniors and young people alike who are each experiencing different but equally deep heartache right now. We are also seeing just how large the gaps have become between these individual acts of kindness and the actions of institutions that were meant to take care of us. The ideal path forward is one where we invest in a broad range of social and economic policies and programs that not only prevent harm, but promote justice through equity. Allyship is not enough, it's time to become accomplices. Amidst the chaos of crisis, caregiving and being human in these tumultuous times, we have to constantly ask ourselves to look deeply into the ways we have been complicit in creating the mess we find ourselves in today. We must learn to treat being held accountable for making change as an act of love, the greatest manifestation of an ethos of care that we can share. It is our shared responsibility to follow the lead of Black, Indigenous, and women of colour who have been at the forefront of this fight for generations.

Arguably, the results that we're seeing from women's leadership during these challenging days is a reflection not of their gender but of what has been demanded of them by the communities they represent as well our societal expectations that women be exceptional to even be granted a chance at leadership to begin with. However, reducing these accomplishments to gender dynamics alone obscures the more challenging work of 'walking the walk' in terms of putting the things we claim to value into action. The challenge is not that we don't have Jacinda Alderns or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortezs here in Canada - because we do, and some of them are here with us this morning. It's just that, broadly speaking ... we don't elect them. We don't hire them. We don't put them in positions of power. Whether it's in agriculture - where more than 70% of the major industry organizations have *no women* on their boards - or the fact that only 3% of TSX-listed Canadian companies had a woman CEO as of 2018, or the evidence that women in rural and remote areas of Canada have lower labour force participation, lower employment rates, and higher poverty rates, the pipeline to power is full of holes. As we look to the future, it is our job to collectively close the gap between the leadership we claim to admire in other jurisdictions and our social and economic commitment to following that same leadership at home. It's not enough to 'empower' women and girls. We must ENABLE them. We *must* elect them, hire them, and

champion imperfect women leaders - and we must plug the holes of harassment, misogyny, and racism that force women to reduce or abandon their ambitions before they even get started.

I spent most of the first decade of my career in local government and the last few years in academic research, and have experienced first-hand and often written about the way women in these fields have to contort themselves to fit our existing systems of power and influence. Two of the most read articles I have ever written for Municipal World were largely fueled by my own experiences with this struggle and tackle the issues of [authenticity](#) and [speaking truth into power](#). While I love being popular, it's not enough to say the words if we don't put them into action. We must move from the authenticity-slogans of the women's empowerment movement to the more powerful exercise of agency through accountability. Let's confront the systems and structures that we have incorrectly assumed are the only way of forming a society. Let's flip the table.

It has been an honour to be invited here to speak to you today, and, in the lead up to this morning, to learn just how much support work is done by the incredible team at Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region. Despite being a life-long friend of Jennifer's, I, along with many others in the community, didn't know that this is one of the largest women's emergency shelters in Ontario, serving more than 1500 women and children and providing almost 22-THOUSAND days of care for women every year. I knew that this organization did important work, but like many outsiders, I did not realize just *how much* work this organization does. The work done by the staff, board, and supporters of the Women's Crisis Services of Waterloo Region to support women in our community is staggering in its depth and reach. The importance of the services provided by organizations like yours is urgent and becoming more and more critical as we navigate a confluence of crises that we've not experienced before. Through our connections to this organization and the work done by this network, you have already implicitly committed yourself to confronting some of the more damaging and systemic challenges facing our society. I have great faith that you will tackle the work ahead with the same care and compassion.

The choices we make today will shape our society, economy, health, and climate for decades to come. Let's make intentional choices. Let's flip the table and build something better. Let's get women into seats of power. Let's have the courage to lead - and the humility to follow.

Thank you.