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# Sex and Sanitation: Women Taking a Stand So They Can Take a Seat

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sex, sanitation, women, water

# Sex and Sanitation: Women Taking a Stand So They Can Take a Seat

*Stan Laskowski and Pamela J. Lazos*

Since the days of the ancient Greeks, women, as the weaker sex, have had to devise clever and unique ways to achieve their hearts' desires. Whether it was stopping a war, bringing down a dictator, or buying a new refrigerator, the method has always been the same: convince the men. Here are a few stories of modern women warriors still engaged in the struggle, some of whom are banding together in support of one of the most basic human needs: sanitation and the ability to WASH.

When Mary Barra, a 30-year veteran of General Motors, the American multinational behemoth and America's largest car company, took the helm as CEO of the ailing manufacturer, she made history as the first woman to head up that particular All Boys Car Club. Barra, number seven on the 2014 Forbes annual 100 Most Powerful Women list that includes such energetic and enigmatic personalities as Angela Merkel, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Oprah Winfrey and Angelina Jolie, is not even a year into the job, and already her guidance is changing GM's presence in the manufacturing world. Under her leadership, GM recalled the 2005-2007 Chevrolet Cobalt, whose faulty ignition switch resulted in 31 accidents and 13 deaths, and dealt quickly with the federal litigation, paying a penalty in the amount of \$35 million and agreeing to submit monthly safety reviews as part of the settlement. For years, the Cobalt safety issue had been pushed under the rug, but Barra looked at the entire mess as "an opportunity to accelerate cultural change" (Muller, 2014). Barra is a forerunner of the type of social change that is not only welcome, but necessary if our society is ever to enact the kind of dramatic redistribution of power that will help us manifest a peaceful and abundant 21st century as opposed to what we now have: myriad regional conflicts spattered across the globe, swelling numbers living below the poverty level, even among developed nations, and one impending environmental disaster after another, threatening to sink us. Where women are involved in decision-making,

force, intimidation and scare tactics are generally traded in favor of options that include cooperation, consideration and empathy. As CEO, Barra brought her woman's sensibilities with her and a woman behaving as a woman in a man's world is not only refreshing, but necessary<sup>1</sup>.

Barra, Merkel, Winfrey and others of their ilk are a change from the status quo, one to be emulated and admired. However, throughout history, conditions have not been as favorable and some women were forced to use the only weapon available in their arsenal: sex. Think Cleopatra who used her feminine wiles to coerce a general (Marc Anthony) (Goldsworthy, 2010). Think Coco Chanel who had a 10-year plus relationship with a Nazi intelligence officer (Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage), and in the process secured her fashion queendom (Vaughan, 2011). Think "Lysistrata," a fictional character in a play written by the Greek comic playwright, Aristophanes, and performed in Ancient Greece circa 411 B.C.

Lysistrata successfully organized the women of Greece to forego sex with their husbands in an effort to end the 27-year long Peloponnesian War (a war between Athens and the Peloponnesian states led by Sparta). Had Lysistrata been a

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<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, women account for a paltry 3% to 4% of CEOs, despite strong statistical evidence to support the fact that women may be better leaders. For example, women scored higher than men in overall leadership effectiveness, and on 12 out of 16 "leadership competencies." Why Women are More Effective Leaders Than Men, Business Insider, January 24, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/study-women-are-better-leaders-2014-1>

man, she may have been a general in the very war she was trying to stop. Alas, she was born a lowly woman, a second class citizen by gender, meaning Athenian society would never care much about what she thought. Lysistrata's success lay in banding the women of Greece together to speak with one cohesive voice. Like a fabric of many threads, together the women were strong and durable, but when threads are pulled or broken, so is the strength of the garment. The Athenian women agreed to forego sex out of necessity (although they weren't happy about it), but what they didn't realize was that this one small detail of organizing into a cohesive group could revolutionize how society interacts as a whole.

There are many take aways from the almost 2500 year old play — the imbalance of power between the sexes; the fact that many women can't be upfront about what they want, but have to almost trick men into giving it to them; the notion that a woman who speaks her mind is seen as aggressive and overreaching — but the one we like best is that it's important, imperative for women to become involved even when society acts as if it doesn't need them. Maybe it's a result of biology or some kind of hard-wired call to action, but men are not always, shall we say, comfortable allowing the situation to unfold in other than the most direct, in-your-face manner. Not every man and not every situation, mind you, but if jungle rules apply, and mostly they do, the guy with the biggest stick is the guy who makes the rules. What if there isn't room for jungle rules in this new millennium? What if there is only room for cooperation?

The old adage that behind every great man there is a great woman is certainly true in more situations than history has recognized, but what is fascinating as we pick up speed in the second decade of the 21st century is how many women are still content to be seen and not heard. Lysistrata, rightfully, noted that men's causes are women's causes and since you can't have cause without effect, it's generally women who are left to pick up the pieces of a bad situation, women who are left husbandless and childless and living in poverty. Why pick up pieces when you can

create the world you want in the first place? It appears that pockets of women across the globe are asking themselves that very same question.

In Liberia in 2003, under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee who won a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts, Liberian women staged a months-long sex strike, combined with additional efforts such as asking Muslim and Christian women to come together to pray for peace, that resulted in the end of a 14-year long civil war (Ahmed, 2014). Gbowee admitted that the strike had little practical effect, but it did get people's attention, which is required with any kind of social change.

In Pereira, Colombia in 2006, women held a ten-day sex strike to end gang violence. It worked, and the murder rate dropped by approximately 26 % (Ahmed, 2014).

In the Philippines in 2011, due to the unsafe conditions on the main road to the market, women devised a sex strike at, of all places, their sewing circle. After a few weeks, the road was reopened and safe for travel (Ahmed, 2014).

In August 2012, in the small African nation of Togo, female members of a group called "Let's Save Togo," went on a sex strike in an effort to denounce a four decades long rule by a single family in what was purportedly a democratic country (Ghitis, 2014). The head of the group told the Togolese women to "keep the gate of your motherland locked up for a week." Unfortunately, it was not successful and the Gnassingbé family is still in control of the country today, but it drew people's attention to the problem. Sometimes baby steps are progress.

In the U.S. in 2012, the "Liberal Ladies who Lunch" organized a sex strike from April 28 to May 5 in support of the contraception mandate that had drawn heavy fire on Capitol Hill and which was requiring that some contraceptive costs be afforded health care coverage (Ahmed, 2014). The conservatives were laughing their heads off since abstinence has always been their preferred conservative method of birth control and here "liberal" women were abstaining voluntarily, but the women had the last laugh

when Congress approved the contraception mandate. In October 2013 in the small town of Barbacoas, Colombia, women went on their second sexstrike in two years, called the “crossed legs movement” (Global Post, 2013). The women resorted to abstinence in order to get repairs made to some of the more remote roads where it could take hours to travel a few miles and where a pregnant woman and her baby died from complications related to childbirth. The first strike in 2011 only resulted in minor improvements so the women were at it again.



Source: World Bank, 2015

We’ve all read the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) statistics. In the 21st century in some developing countries, women walk miles — on average 6km in Africa and Asia — to gather water (UN Water, 2014). They carry their jerrycan — a 40-liter bucket that, when filled, weighs about 44 lbs. — and lug it back to their homes on their heads. Years of carrying this weight results in spinal column injuries, but if you’re a woman, what can you do, since it’s your responsibility to collect water? Perhaps you’ll bring yourself, your clothes, your dishes, and whatever else needs washing to the water source, a pond or a river, and you’ll bathe yourself and clean your clothes and dishes and then you’ll defecate in that same water body. In the U.S., that’s unthinkable, but in some parts of developing nations, it’s standard operating procedure. E coli and waterborne diseases are rampant and approximately 750,000 children under the age of five die from diarrhea caused by these diseases each year (UN Water, 2014). Or perhaps you’re the one out of three woman who risks physical or sexual assault because you have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night outside of your home (Unilever, 2006). Statistics say that more than a billion people defecate in the open every day (UN Water, 2014). At night, the danger intensifies, as the world witnessed recently when two teenage

girls from the Uttar Pradesh state in India were raped and hanged. The girls had gone to the open fields to relieve themselves and instead, met an abhorrent and untimely end (BBC News, 2015). So instead of relieving yourself, you learn to suppress your urges, otherwise you may get more than relief from your bathroom break. If you’re a girl and you’ve just begun menstruating, it’s likely you will stay home from school since there are insufficient facilities for bathing during the day (Unilever, 2006) (Mcmahon, 2011).

Thankfully there are people working to generate solutions. NGOs and for profits can make inroads where governments sometimes fail, working hard at simple solutions: to bring flush toilets to even the poorest houses, and simple water sanitation systems that enable entrepreneurs, generally women, from these poorest areas to provide clean water for their townspeople and make a bit of money as well. The change is slow, but brilliant minds are at work and with the seeds planted and just the right amount of good clean water, there can be positive change.

Yet more is necessary if change is to be long lasting. Women need to be part of the conversation, for while threats, violence and fear campaigns may keep people in line for a time, they will never work over time. By excluding

women from the conversation, you are excluding one half of the world's population, the yin half, the receiving, soothing, welcoming half. A worldview based upon a fire mentality — the yang, masculine side — that does not include a tempering water element — the yin, female side — is a world destined to burn itself out.

By all indications, the world stands balanced now, on the head of a pin. Climate change, rising sea levels, melting polar ice caps, species extinction, overpopulation, any one of these might be enough to take us out, but all at once is an epic crisis. Maybe it's time for women to take a cue from the gay rights movement and come out of the closet with their opinions and ideas, or perhaps it's time to storm the citadel, a call to arms using our weapons of choice: women's words and women's wisdom.

One such positive step could be a call to action to fix the sanitation issues that plague billions by treating WASH as the battle cry through two words - WASH Me. Imagine the power emanating from two little words with one voice of millions of women behind it. Throughout history, women as the fairer sex have had little clout, but history is changing in unprecedented leaps, moment to moment. There are women who have been collecting water for most of their lives who need to have a say, women innovators and engineers, hydrologists and hydrogeologists, doers and thinkers who should be key parties with standing in the decision-making, women who have the knowledge and experience to formulate workable solutions, ones best for each of their communities, for every community is different, and who knows home better than women?

Need some inspiration to get things moving?  
Here are a few additional ideas:

Do you live in an area that does not have access to basic sanitation? Why not organize your own "crossed legs movement," or any other kind of movement, really, for one month. Anything to get the conversation going and to move it from talk to action.

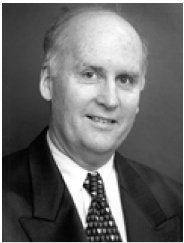
World Toilet Day is on November 19, 2015. Why not join forces with the World Toilet Organization (WTO), an NGO dedicated to improving sanitation worldwide. You can donate your time, or money, organize your block, or your state. No effort is too big or too small.

How about a race to the pond? People like to run, and fitness first is in so why not organize a race in your town or state? Money raised through pledges could go toward simple water solutions in underserved areas.

The Millennium Development Goals — one of which is to halve by 2015 the amount of people who lack access to WASH — are to be met by December 31, 2015 (UN, 2014). What can you accomplish by then? Better yet, what could you accomplish if you knew you could not fail?

Take the pledge. Join an online chat group and engage in a dialogue dedicated to working on world water issues. Submit your name, location, and email address to the wH2O Journal blog, who will keep a running tab of participants and submit your ideas to the U.N. before 12/31/15. Share your ideas with like-minded collaborators and let's create the kind of world we want to live in, one where women and men work side-by-side, creating global solutions.

The time for conflict has passed; the time for cooperation is here, and that is where women excel — cooperatively. Set them loose on these issues, modern women versus modern problems of water, sanitation and hygiene, and the world will see how well women WASH.



Stan Laskowski

*Stan Laskowski has been a senior executive, leader, teacher, scientist, advisor, and mentor during his career in environmental protection. Currently he is a lecturer/advisor at the University of Pennsylvania. At Penn he develops and teaches environmental management and policy courses and advises students and professors in many Departments.*

*His areas of special interest include issues related to the attainment of the UN Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation, US and global environmental management and policy, environmental regulation, and making Penn's campus more sustainable. He has been and continues to be active in support of various non-profit organizations. In 2006, Mr. Laskowski, with other environmental leaders, founded the Philadelphia Global Water Initiative [www.pgwi.org](http://www.pgwi.org), a Regional network of organizations dedicated to helping to provide water and sanitation services through projects in the developing world and through education and research. He was also instrumental in establishing the Initiative for Global Environmental Leadership at Wharton/Penn and remains active in their efforts regarding business and the environment. In 2009 he received the LPS Distinguished Teaching Award for Non-Standing Faculty. Mr. Laskowski is a former Senior Executive at the US Environmental Protection Agency where he served for over 31 years including 15 years as the Deputy Regional Administrator for the Middle-Atlantic States for which he was awarded the Presidential Distinguished Executive Award.*

*Pam Lazos' passions run deep and wide, however for brevity's sake, let's just say her family, writing, and the environment. She is the author of "Six Sisters", a collection of novellas (released January 9, 2015); a blogger ([www.greenlifebluewater.wordpress.com](http://www.greenlifebluewater.wordpress.com)); on the Board of Advisors for the wH2O Journal, the Journal of Gender and Water*



*(U of Penn); an active and enthusiastic member of the Jr. League of Lancaster; a former correspondent for her local newspaper (Lancaster Intelligencer Journal); a literary magazine contributor (Rapportage); a former Editor-in-Chief for the Environmental Law and Technology Journal (Temple Law School); a ghostwriter (Abracadabra); the author of a children's book (Into the Land of the Loud); and of the novel "Oil and Water", an environmental murder mystery about oil spills and green technology (due December of 2015); an environmental lawyer for the U.S. EPA in Philadelphia (the opinions of which she does not represent here); and, because it's cool, a beekeeper's apprentice. She practices laughter daily.*

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