

ADVERTISEMENT

HOST: Female leadership has been front and centre during the pandemic. From New Zealand where COVID-19 infections have been managed under the leadership of a female Prime Minister, to Canada where the country's top doctor is a woman of colour. How are women leading differently during the pandemic and how is it redefining what leadership is?

Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Lauren McKeon, an author and journalist.

LAUREN MCKEON:

Hi, my name is Lauren McKeon and I'm an author and journalist my second book, *No More Nice Girls*, examined the twisty obstacle-filled paths women take to power, and then the impossible standards they face once they get there. In it, I argued that we don't only need more women in leadership, we need to change our very idea of what leadership is and what it looks like, who can achieve it. I encouraged us to place more value on collaboration, compassion, creativity, community transparency, and even vulnerability. Qualities that often seem like the polar opposites of what we see in many popular leaders today. That book came out in 2020 about a week before the pandemic was declared. You know, there have been few silver linings in the past 12 months, but one is certainly the ways in which we've seen women step into leadership. In addition to Theresa Tams, chief's spot at the federal level, six of the top doctors in the country out of 13 provinces and territories, are women.

There are also many women, chief public health officers at municipal levels across Canada together. They have shown us a new way to lead, but also to live, you know, they have defied hate, deliberate misinformation, partisanship, they've spoken out against anti-Asian racism and they have crafted the country's new unofficial mantra: be calm, be kind, be safe.

I think that we've gravitated toward people like Alberta's Deena Hinshaw and B.C.'s Bonnie Henry, precisely because they have seemed to abandon the bravado, brashness and unwavering ego that makes many male leaders so popular in the past and still in the present. You know, these women have been either perfect nor impervious. They've been honest and human. They have struggled just like us broke down just like us and have admitted to hard, impossible inside days, just like us. They've let us see them cry. And if this vulnerability and relate-ability felt surprising and our leaders this past year, I think it has also felt necessary.

Kindness and empathy are not just nice-to-haves. At the international level, when it comes to the pandemic. So these are the 194 countries have shown that women leaders fared better, both in terms of infection and mortality rates. One possible reason given is that unlike men who tended to prioritise the economy, women appear to approach the crisis with one top mandate, and that is to save lives. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't celebrate our male leaders. You know, that's not what I'm saying. It means we must make a point of celebrating the women who did leadership differently during the pandemic or as one Guardian article put it. Speaking of that study, plenty of countries with male leaders have done well, but few with female leaders have done badly.

I know it doesn't feel like it, but this pandemic will end. Right now, though, we are in a moment where we should ask ourselves if it's ending means we actually want to go back to normal. I know that sounds ridiculous, but stay with me. I want us to ask why can't choose our blueprint for recovery. Instead, build something better than normal. The pandemic has exposed deep inequalities and also new ways to

The Conversation Piece Podcast: transcript of Lauren McKeon's episode

address them. It has handed us incredible opportunity to figure out what it means for everyone to live better and what kind of leaders we need to help us get there.

My next book is called *Women of the Pandemic*. For it, I spoke, I spent the past year talking to 50 women about their lives and their challenges during this past year, but also their visions for the future. One of the women I spoke to is Paulette Senior. She's the president and CEO of the Canadian women's Foundation. She believes that our future better living can include things like universal childcare, inclusive education that tells history from a more truthful and anti-racist perspective, a policing system that protects everybody and doesn't cost us billions committed non-defensive politicians. I'd like to end on something. She told me during our interview. And that is when we decide that we as human beings are their priority. Everything else will follow from that decision. Think about that. You know, I couldn't agree with her more. I believe that putting people and our own humanity first is how we can continue to build much needed equality. And in that vision of better living for us all. Thank you.

HOST: Lauren McKeon spoke at The Walrus Talks at Home: Living Better in March, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.