



Jenelle Saunders, WTS-LA 2021-22 President

Choosing to Challenge: Questioning the Answer

“When I’m sometimes asked, ‘When will there be enough (women on the Supreme Court)?’ and my answer is, ‘When there are nine.’ People are shocked. But there’d been nine men, and nobody’s ever raised a question about that.” The author of this quote, of course, is the late, great, inspirational Ruth Bader Ginsburg. And her words ring truer than ever this month, the month we globally celebrate International Women’s Day (March 8th). Indeed, she has a point.

Women comprise half of the world’s population. Yet the reality of an all-female Supreme Court remains yet to be seen. So, when skeptics ask why we work so hard to champion for and celebrate the advancement of women in the workforce, or ask when enough is enough, we can safely say, “not yet.” Our fight continues until an all-female Supreme Court is as traditional as an all-male Supreme Court has been in the past. And what applies to the Supreme Court most certainly applies to transportation. For now, we celebrate our progress toward a transportation landscape with greater female representation—our ultimate goal being the elimination of gender bias and total gender equality. We may not be there yet, but we are making progress both inside and outside of transportation. Consider the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

The governing body of the County of Los Angeles, the Board serves as the executive and legislative head of the largest and most complex county government in the US. It’s also the largest non-state government in the US, and if it were a state, it would be larger than 41 other states in the Union in terms of population. If you’re talking gross domestic product (GDP), it is larger than all but nine other states with a GDP of \$727 billion (yes, with a B). Now guess what? All five Board Supervisors are women (several of whom participated in a WTS-LA virtual panel on March 10th). All the more remarkable is that during their tenure, the sky hasn’t fallen, the earth hasn’t collapsed, the sun still shines, and the grass still grows. In fact, since women have been running it, LA County has flourished and elevated programs focused on inclusion and economic growth, despite singular challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, political and social unrest, and several significant natural disasters. So, all-female leadership has proven to be effective, profitable, and strong. And I am thrilled about that. Simply put, the LA County Supervisors’ gender is no longer a factor and their talents and abilities are winning the day. Kudos to them all. Of course, progress hasn’t ended there.

Women throughout Southern California and the nation continue to lead and strive in all areas of society. Here in Southern California transportation, women have made tremendous gains in virtually every

modality. But when women lead, it's still news. Think about it. How many times have you seen articles or news stories extolling the virtues of a female leader as something unique? While I certainly applaud those stories and watch them with joy and pride, part of me still wonders when the day will come when gender no longer defines the story.

On March 8th, we celebrated International Women's Day and continue on through the month. This year's theme is, "Choose to Challenge." So, I challenge you. For the entire month of March, look around. Observe. Notice how you perceive people in leadership roles. How much is gender involved in that perception? Why does gender matter in that regard? Imagine if an all-male leadership team were women? Imagine the boards of directors of companies being all women instead of men. What really changes?

In 2005, Norway passed a law requiring that women make up a minimum of 40% of all corporate boards. In less than a decade, women went from comprising 5% to more than 40% of all corporate boards. Much of Europe followed suit. And what happened to these corporations? Business went on as usual in nearly every case. Except for one thing: women achieved a degree of parity and performed the same, if not better, than men. So, you can see, we're making great strides, but there is still much work to be done.

Let's continue fighting for these positions of power and authority so that one day, gender equality will be the standard and people will stop asking, "when is enough, enough?"— that's when we will know our work is done.

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