



## 50/50: Rethinking the Past, Present, and Future of Women in Power

### Discussion Guide

Director: Tiffany Shlain

Year: 2016

Time: 20 min

#### You might know this director from:

Making of a Mensch (2015)

Connected: An Autobiography About Love, Death & Technology (2011)

Yelp: With Apologies to Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (2011)

The Tribe (2005)

## FILM SUMMARY

It's no secret that the world at large has a gender inequality problem. But if we sift through the sands of time, we find that there have indeed been powerful female leaders the world over, from Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth to Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike and beyond. If you had to venture a guess, how many female world leaders would you believe there are today? In 2016, the answer was 50. Nowhere near the 50 percent mark, but more than most might assume. And therein lies the problem: we have been trained to accept as normal the scarcity of women in positions of power.

Upon realizing these facts, director Tiffany Shlain set out to tell a different story, one in which women have held and continue to hold presidential and prime ministerial power. If we look back in history, humanity began as a more egalitarian society, where men and women shared in positions of power. Anyone could be warriors, healers, lawmakers, or what have you. The earliest known written laws, composed over 10,000 years ago, reflect this. So, how did we as a species divert ourselves from this cultural trend of gender equality? When did men start to vastly outnumber women in the workforce and in politics?

With 50/50, Shlain aims to answer these questions while boldly posing another: why can't we have an equal amount of women and men in positions of power around the globe today? Citing the likes of Germany's current Chancellor Angela Merkel and South Korea's sitting President Park Geun-hye as shining examples, Shlain makes her case with animation and personal insight, hoping to leave her own impact on the world in showing just how much sense it makes to go 50/50.

## FILM THEMES

Sadly, patriarchal structures are alive and well. Of the 146 nations that the World Economic Forum studied in 2014 and 2016, just 56 of them (only 38 percent) had a female head of government or state for at least one year in the past half-century, says a new report by [Pew Research Center](#), and even worse, we've long believed this to be acceptable. With 50/50, history is recontextualized and gender equality is on the horizon.

### WOMEN IN POSITIONS OF POWER IS NOT NEW

If we look back in history, humanity began as a more egalitarian society, where men and women shared in positions of power and everyone could choose the occupation they wanted regardless of gender. The most famous early example of a woman in power is obviously Cleopatra, but look back even further and you'll find Queen Hatshepsut, who ruled over Egypt for 22 years. In Great Britain, Boadicea led a revolt against the Romans during her 35-year reign. And in East Asia, Wu Zetian served as the first and only Empress of China from 683 A.D. through 705 A.D. Not such a new idea after all.

### THE SHIFT AWAY FROM EGALITARIANISM

There were two main reasons for the shift away from gender equality in governance: literacy, which quite literally rewired the human brain, and agriculture, which favored physical strength and the conquest of land. Cultures the world over began to see men as the more powerful and more important gender. In ancient Mesopotamia, a law was written that stated that "if a woman speaks to a man out of turn, her teeth will be smashed in with a burned brick," thus setting the standard for patriarchal structures that would last for centuries.

### WOMEN WRITTEN OUT OF HISTORY

Once patriarchal structures had been set in place as the norm, history was written with an intentionally biased viewpoint that overlooked or blatantly excluded the achievements of women in positions of power. Out of fear and a need for complete control, monuments to women of power were destroyed, records of female leaders were downplayed or erased completely, and it was essentially forgotten that at one point in human history egalitarianism was the norm.

### THE FUTURE IS 50/50

With each passing day, women are tilting the gender scale back into equilibrium, in politics, work wages, and beyond through activism, lobbying, petitioning, and marching in the streets like the hundreds of thousands of women who attended the Women's March on Washington on January 21, 2017. Women are no longer willing to have their voices silenced and are taking measures to ensure that they will be heard, but there is still much work to be done. According to a recent report by [The Nation](#), "At the current rate of progress, it will take nearly 500 years for women to reach fair representation in government."

**"If we really build on the centuries of momentum and generations of courageous women that brought us this far, we can take this story of scarcity and turn it into a story of abundance."**

Tiffany Shlain

**"We can't take any of these hard fought rights for granted."**

Tiffany Shlain



## FILM FACTS:

- **50/50: RETHINKING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF WOMEN IN POWER** debuted on October 28, 2016 simultaneously at #TEDWomen at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and online on Refinery29 and on TV on Comcast's Watchable.
- According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only half of the world's working-age women were part of the labor force in 2015, compared to 77 percent of working-age men.
- In 1996, Tiffany Shlain founded the Webby Awards, while two years later she helped to co-found the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences.
- A recent study by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University shows that women are 51 percent of the population in the United States but make up only 20 percent of the U.S. Senate, 19 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives, 24 percent of statewide offices, 24 percent of state legislative seats, 18 percent of mayors in cities with populations over 30,000, and 0 percent of presidents of the United States.
- The International Women's Day (IWD) campaign reported that "the World Economic Forum predicted in 2014 that it would take until 2095 to achieve global gender parity. Then one year later in 2015, they estimated that a slowdown in the already glacial pace of progress meant the gender gap wouldn't close entirely until 2133."
- The Nation notes that "leaders in electing women include Sweden (45 percent female representation at the national level), Finland (42.5 percent), Denmark and the Netherlands (39 percent) and Germany (36.5 percent)."
- In 2017, the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that The United States Ranks 100th in a ranking of the of the percentage of women in the lower or single House in national governments, just below Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Kenya.
- According to the Pew Research Center in March of 2017, there were eight current women leaders that were their country's first. These women were leaders in Chile, Estonia, Germany, Liberia, Lithuania, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, and Nepal.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Join** thousands of organizations, companies, schools, museums, libraries and homes on May 10, 2017 for [50/50 Day](#), a global conversation about what it will take to get to a more gender-balanced world in all sectors of society!
2. **Donate** to the [Global Fund For Women](#) who aim "to find, fund, and amplify the courageous work of women who are building social movements and challenging the status quo."
3. **Sign** the [Pledge for Parity](#), an initiative by [Representation 20/20](#) to advocate for "systemic reforms to recruitment process, voting systems, and legislative practices so that more women run, win, serve, and lead."
4. **Celebrate** the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women because, as the [International Women's Day](#) organizers note, visibility and awareness help drive positive change for women!

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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