

# Making the edit: why we need more women in Wikipedia

Women make up 15-20% of the editors on Wikipedia. Katherine Maher, who heads up its parent organisation, discusses how she is creating a more gender-balanced community

[Oliver Balch](#) Thu 28 Nov 2019 16.21 GMT



Wikimedia donates more than \$8m (£6.2m) to a variety of charities, many of which are concerned with increasing the representation of women on the site. Photograph: Yves Herman/REUTERS

Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia, boasts an ambitious vision: to make ["the sum of all human knowledge"](#) freely available on the internet. Its strategy for doing so? Turn everyday web users into unpaid, online "editors".

The idea has proved stunningly successful. Since the site's launch in

2001, it has clocked up nearly [50m pages of online content and generated close to 1bn edits](#) – and that’s just in English. Pages exist in [nearly 300 other languages](#), from French and Spanish to Faroese and Sranantongo (from Suriname).

But, admits Katherine Maher – who has headed up the [Wikimedia Foundation](#) (the non-profit that runs Wikipedia) since early 2016 – the strategy suffers one major flaw: women have been pitifully slow to join the party. The website’s gender figures are “not good”, she says.

Wikimedia’s privacy policy prevents it from mining user data from the site, but the working assumption of Maher and her team of 350 is that women make up between 15-20% of total contributors.

The website’s content says it all. Articles about men exceed those about women by about four to one. For Maher, correcting Wikipedia’s huge diversity imbalance represents an “incredibly important priority”.

As she openly accepts: “If our vision is a world in which every single human can freely share in the sum of all knowledge, then all knowledge has to be written by all people, which means that it has to represent all people.”

So how is she going about it? Maher, a 36-year-old Californian with a background in HIV/Aids prevention and development policy, outlines three primary measures.

The first two might loosely be described as “external” and conform to what you would expect from a liberal, Silicon Valley-funded foundation: namely, grants to well-meaning organisations and lobbying for progressive policy change.

Every year, Maher says, Wikimedia donates more than \$8m (£6.2m) to a

variety of charities, with more than 148 grants in the last quarter of this year alone. Since Maher took charge, a growing proportion of these are directed to organisations related to women and non-binary individuals.

The largest such recipient of late is [Art+Feminism](#), a global network of librarians, students, artists and others based out of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In April and May every year, the charity organises workshops around the world aimed at helping increase Wikipedia's coverage of female artists.



Katherine Maher, CEO, Wikimedia

This year's "[edit-a-thon](#)" resulted in updates and new content for more than 25,000 entries, including the likes of Nigerian author [Akwaeke Emezi](#), Canadian sculptor [Luanne Martineau](#), and the somewhat terrifying-sounding US 1960s feminist movement, the [Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell](#) (Witch).

Another grantee using Wikimedia's cash to bring balance to its pages is [Whose Knowledge?](#), a global initiative designed to give voice to

marginalised communities in public knowledge. In this vein, the charity's [Visible Wiki Women](#) sets out to increase the number of black, brown and indigenous women depicted on the site.

As for public policy, Maher says her focus is less on lobbying for specific government interventions and more on bring a "gender equity lens" to the general process of policy-making: "For example, when educational institutions or a government makes digital policy, are they really thinking about the gender impacts of these issues?"

The hard work here is done by Wikimedia's community partners around the world, rather than by Maher's team directly. She cites the example of Argentina, where Wikimedia's local affiliates have served as a "powerhouse" for [advancing women's and LGBT rights](#).

But what of developments to level the gender gap within Wikimedia itself? As host and operator of Wikipedia, now the tenth [most visited site on the internet](#), this – rather than grants or lobbying – is arguably where Maher has the greatest clout to make a difference.

The priority here, she says, is to adapt the language and structure of Wikipedia's interface with its contributors so that women feel more predisposed to get involved.

"A big part of why [female] [Wikipedia](#) editors edit is because of the social interactions and the social bonds that they form in what is really a community. But that is not immediately apparent when you first start editing our site," she observes.

Quite how Maher intends to tweak the site remains unclear, but clarifying that editing is a "social action" (which appeals more to women) and not merely an "individual contribution" (the motivator for many men) will be integral, she says.

What she can say with confidence, however, is that female participants in Wikimedia's sponsored "edit-a-thons" are much more likely to continue editing when they receive hands-on support and direct personal feedback.

"There is a more collaborative impulse, it seems, that is rewarding and encourages that continued participation ... From a tactical point of view, we are thinking what we can do in the software product that helps facilitate that," she states.

Maher's strategy for increasing female users is similarly incipient. Is Wikipedia employing language that puts women off or that appeals more to men than women? She doesn't know the answer, she admits, but accepts that Wikimedia needs to find out.

"We really need to think about what kind of language we are using to talk about the value of free knowledge, because free knowledge is valuable to absolutely everyone and we want to make sure that we are communicating that in a way that resonates."

Making the internet more gender-balanced is clearly not just the job of one website, yet the dissonance between Wikimedia's egalitarian goals and its user profiles puts it at the centre of this particular debate.

A more gender-balanced Wikipedia would be an infinitely improved and more comprehensive Wikipedia. On that, Maher is unequivocal. And not just because there would be more articles about women. Gender is but one arbiter of women's interests, she acknowledges – and not necessarily even the most important.

"If we have more women editing Wikipedia, do I expect more articles about women scientists and novelists? Absolutely," she states. "But do I expect more articles about things that are just of interest to anybody.

Yeah, I expect that too."