

PERSPECTIVE:

WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
AT A CROSSROADS

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Leaders hold power – substantive and symbolic power. They shape decisions and exercise influence over current and future directions. We look up to leaders. We expect them to set standards, rise up to challenges and define courses of action. We trust them to act in good faith and with integrity in ways that benefit the collective good. Leaders serve as role models who shape cultural standards, social norms and behaviors.

Political leaders in particular do not only shape the lives of immediate followers, but those of entire populations. In a representative democracy, leaders *represent* the interests of the population they serve. If those leaders are not attuned to those interests and do not understand the unique challenges and needs of those they represent, they are likely to enact policies that ignore those interests and make decisions that exclude those needs.

DESPITE MANY CRACKS, THE GLASS CEILING IS STILL IN PLACE

Women have made tremendous strides over the last few decades and some were able to rise to the top crest of leadership in every profession. There is however, a paradox in women's progress. Despite the fact that women have higher human capital than their male counterparts and have been earning more degrees than men since the 1982, they are still underrepresented in leadership in every sector. In 2013-2014, women earned 57.1% of Bachelor degrees, 59.9% of master degrees and 51.8% of doctorate degrees.

The good news is that since 1971, women gained 16-18 percentage points in elected office in the U.S. They have increased their share of seats in the U.S. Congress from 3% in 1971

FEMALE HIKER (RUSHELLE BOWIE) LOOKING OUT TOWARDS UPPER SARANAC LAKE AND MT MORRIS FROM FLOODWOOD MT, FRANKLIN CO., ADIRONDACK PARK & FOREST PRESERVE, NY

to 19.4% in 2017; from 7% in statewide elected office in 1971 to 23.7% in 2017; and from 8% in State Legislatures in 1975 to 24.9% in 2017. The bad news is that they still occupy less than 30% of seats in those critical decision making bodies in 2017 and progress has been slow to date. The slow progress cannot be explained by lack of qualifications or existence of women who are competent to occupy these offices, because women have been earning more degrees than men for the last 30 years.

In New York State, the picture is equally dismal. Despite gaining an impressive 23 percentage points in representation in the New York State Legislature, women occupy less than 30% of seats in this body in 2017.

Women occupy more than 50% of mid management positions in many sectors, but getting to the top remains more elusive. The glass ceiling is still firmly in place, while women are making significant cracks, we are constantly reminded that it takes more than merit and leadership skills to break through and make it to the top. It takes a transcendence of a deeply rooted gendered psyche of gatekeepers, of voters, and of oneself.

Yes, we still suffer from a gendered psyche when it comes to electing women to political office. As much as we risk exposing women to stereotypical threats which have proven to perpetuate the vicious cycle of self-exclusion, and risk having women unconsciously conform to those threats, this must be said. Denial stifles progress by creating a false sense that women enjoy a level playing field. If we were in doubt about the extent to which unconscious biases steer our electoral decisions, take a look at the media's treatment of Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton during the 2016 election cycle, which only confirmed that we can no longer dismiss this painful reality.

Women in the U.S. Congress recently interviewed indicated that they face challenges both during their bid for office and when they get to elected office. They pointed out that women are often evaluated against different standards from their male counterparts and often lack the support system they need while campaigning, in comparison to their male colleagues (Dittman et al. 2017).

Women must double their efforts to be taken seriously and prove themselves. They must juggle work and family responsibilities at a greater degree than their male colleagues. They struggle to make their voice heard in every congressional space. They are often valued based on "style" rather than "substance." On the other hand, heightened sensitivity about the need for diverse voices in Congress can afford women representatives some opportunities and widen the space they are provided during debates (Dittman et al. 2017)

THE GLASS CEILING MUST BE SHATTERED TO STOP HINDERING OUR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Does one have to occupy a gender category to be attuned to the unique challenges people in the same category face and to represent them fairly in political office? The answer is yes. Experience matters when leaders make decisions. Our actions are informed by our personal and professional

experiences, which in turn color the perceptual lens through which we see the world. And people experience the world incredibly differently.

There is no doubt that women's experiences have been shaped by their position as females in a patriarchal society. Cultural norms that subordinated women to the authority of men created legacies of exclusion of women from occupations that are deemed the domains of men, defined the parameters of behaviors that are acceptable for women, and reduced the female value to her physical characteristics and childbearing functions.

Remnants of these norms are still rooted in our institutions and in our psyche, and they are passed down generationally. Our station on the socially-constructed identity ladder determines our worldview and our core beliefs. Those core beliefs are resistant to change. The heritage of patriarchy defines the lens through which one views the world as well as the socialization one receives. Women are not monolithic. Race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, age, and sexual orientation intersect powerfully with gender to determine their leadership opportunities, or the lack thereof. Women of color experience gender bias differently from white women and racial bias differently from men of color. Being a female who exists at the crossroads of marginalization and who occupies intersecting marginalized identities further sharpens her outlook and curtails the space in which she operates.

On the other hand, privilege can create blind spots that make it simpler to dismiss others' experiences by applying this false assumption: if it does not happen to me, then it does not exist. Living in a male body can blind one from truly recognizing the nuances and severity of women's experiences of objectification, de-valuation, and exclusions and their resulting manifestations on women's psyche. If one does not examine one's own world with a critical lens, one is bound to miss how marginalization and societal exclusions take place every day and how – often times – the best intentions do not alter the odds stacked against those who live at the margins.

Differences matter in political office! And being a female in political leadership matters. On a collective level, it matters because it equalizes the scales of power and allows a historically marginalized group, on the basis of gender, to claim power, to claim political representation, and to claim self-definition. On an individual level, it allows members of the group to claim equal opportunity to high status and high paying occupations. Congresswomen interviewed in a 2017 study argued that they occupy a role model status that inspires and motivates other women to walk in their footsteps and run for office. We cannot be what we cannot see. We need more women in elected office so we can get more women in elected office.

The paradox of the American experience is at the heart of this dilemma. While we cherish and elevate values of justice and equality, we are unable to break from the shackles of the past that bind us to norms that protect the power of those at the top and ensure the status quo remains unthreatened. Until we fully and genuinely embrace those American ideals, women and other minorities will struggle to transcend oppressive structures that are designed to keep them in their place.

The lack of balanced representation of women at the decision making tables in every sector, particularly in public service leadership, is one of the most critical challenges we face as a society today. It is a challenge because, when we do not see women equitably represented, we tend to have less trust in the government and less confidence in its credibility and legitimacy, resulting in a loss of faith in the government's ability to fully represent us and genuinely act in our interests. All of this translates to political alienation, less political participation, and an unhealthy democracy. The exclusion of women from decision making is absolutely destructive to the health of our representative democracy.

When women are not equally represented in leadership, we tend to treat critical societal needs and issues as “women’s issues.” The needs and issues that affect women disproportionately tend to be marginalized. When we keep in place structures that stigmatize women and shed doubt on their competency and ability to serve as leaders, we maintain the cycle of exclusion. Furthermore, when we narrow the pool of talent from which we are drawing, we diminish our ability to capture the full potential of the workforce.

Do women have a leadership advantage? Women serving in the 114 U.S. Congress believe they do. They believe that they bring different perspectives to their work that emerge from their lived personal and professional experiences as women. Their priorities reflect their gender interests and their needs as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters. They believe they work more collaboratively, consensually, and collectively, which enables them to cut through partisan gridlock, and they place an emphasis on different priorities and develop legislative agendas that are different from those of their male colleagues. These Congresswomen focus more on outcomes and accomplishing goals and less on political positioning. They credit these achievements to having less ego and less concern over receiving publicity (Dittman et. al. 2017).

Many scholars, however, have warned against these essentialist arguments that paint all women with a uniform brush. Instead, they have urged a focus on equal opportunity in political representation, protecting the health of our democracy, guarding against political alienation, and loss of public trust and perception of lack of credibility of our political institutions brought about by lack of descriptive representation. (Descriptive representation is defined as having elected officials who share common characteristics with the constituents they serve. In this case the common characteristic is gender.) In any case, we must work hard to change the balance in gender representation at every decision making table because, if we do not, we risk halting political and economic development and tarnishing our image globally.

TOWARDS BALANCED REPRESENTATION IN ELECTED OFFICE

The critical problems lie in boosting the number of women who run for office and in helping them run effective campaigns. There is evidence that barriers facing women as they campaign for office is greater than those they experience when they get to office (Dittman et. al. 2017).

The most effective strategy for recruiting women is to emphasize the potential change that women can make when they are in office – to underscore that being at the table and participating in decision making serves a larger purpose than oneself. Public service is a duty and, while politics may be dirty, you can choose to be ethical and maintain your integrity. Cleaning up the image of politics is critical if we want to increase the number of women who run for office.

We also need to provide tools for women to run successful campaigns and increase their likelihood of success. That’s where training that provides those tools can play a very important role in helping women launch effective election campaigns. In training, women learn to build thicker skin and to strengthen skills that make them prepared. Trainings help women construct and internalize political leadership identities and provide them with the tools to address subtle and invisible forms of gender bias that interfere with their leadership identity construction.

Mentoring and networking are also critical tactics to help potential candidates avoid mistakes made by their predecessors. Women are realizing that their exclusion from formal networks and the insufficient mentoring they have received have held them back. They are recognizing that men have relied on the “good old boys’ networks” to advance their careers and that they need to create similar, reliable, inclusive networks. For women, there was formerly a sense that networking was a dirty word synonymous with using or taking advantage of people you know for your own self-interest. In general, women are socialized to avoid self-interest, so there has been a resistance to networking. This perception, however, is shifting. Women are realizing that they are building relationships and not using others. They are emphasizing meaningful connections and friendships that are mutually-beneficial. Also, women see networking as a way to give back to other women. By defining networking as such, embedding networking in a larger purpose, and employing a social justice framework, women have “purified” the act of networking. They have redefined the term. Now they are creating their own networks and relying more and more on formal and informal mentors.

Let’s enable change. Let’s deliberately and proactively enable balanced representation of women in political leadership by supporting female candidates with our time and our treasure. It matters!

LITERATURE CITED

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