

In terms of political representation and voice women are grossly under-represented, unheard

By Suzanne Kapral Kelly
Guest Writer

If 53 percent of the United States population is made up of women, why are the majority of elected representatives men?

Women are also the majority in the workforce, write the majority of checks, make the majority of household decisions, and have majority responsibility for children and the elderly. Currently, 55 percent of undergraduate students are female and 60 percent are graduate students.

Yet, in terms of political representation and voice, women are grossly under-represented and unheard. In fact, United States women hold only 16.8 percent of political offices; female representation ranks 71st in the world. Among more industrialized countries, the United States trails Rwanda, Sweden, Cuba, Finland, Argentina, Netherlands, Denmark, Costa Rica, Spain, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada. Moreover, if political trends continue, women will not realize equal representation until 2076.



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In the last three decades, the percentage of women serving in both the House and Senate rose from 4.3 percent to 14.6 percent. If women only make up 14.6 percent of Congress, how can the collective “we” expect fair representation in terms of laws and other significant decisions that impact the lives of women (and, by extension, children)?

According to the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University, the statistics for elected women in Pennsylvania are skewed as well.

The chances of being elected to a position of power as an unknown are virtually non-existent.

Men typically start their political careers by entering lower-level political positions, which then serve as a springboard to higher, more influential offices. What’s missing here, however, is the fact that the majority of men do not have the majority of responsibilities directly related to the family and home.

The rules for women are different.

Of course women can and do make vast achievements regarding education and work yet these are usually expected to be accomplished in addition to meeting the responsibilities of home and family. Obviously, there are no laws stating women must work 12-14 hour days (or feel guilty if they don’t); yet there is an accepted understanding or norm passed down through generations that supports this behavior.

By the time children are grown, women who have not yet entered the workforce, let alone politics, are considered beyond their prime — with this, it’s more difficult to find “investors” who will hire, or back that individual.

If that’s the case, then how do women effectively

achieve a level of advancement, in this case political office, while maintaining the duties of motherhood, spouse/significant other and homemaker? During an interview in 2007, I asked this question to then newly-elected Pennsylvania State Senator, Lisa Baker. Senator Baker replied that her immediate and extended family helped make it possible by providing tremendous and unwavering support.

There are several professional organizations whose mission is to help women get elected to office. Understanding full-well that there are several stereotypes that women must successfully overcome, these groups teach, guide and encourage women who want to run for office or run a political campaign for office. The groups are organized, focused and often include in-depth, formal educational and training programs.

But, is that enough?

No.

This is why the “elect women” groups such as the Pennsylvania Women’s Campaign Fund and the Center for Women in Politics at Rutgers University offer not only the tools to succeed but the networks to succeed as well. Women, if they are to succeed, must stop trying to fit the male definition of leadership.

Still, will the investment of time and money through attending seminars and workshops guarantee an elected position? Of course not, which is why any credible campaign consultant or facilitator and formal training program will clearly state that the odds, while improving, are still in a man’s favor. Moreover, female candidates have another disadvantage not often experienced by the male opposition — access to money. In order to overcome this hurdle, women must learn to be relentless in asking for money — even if they hate it. One-on-one, personal solicitation is the most cost-effective and powerful way to raise money.

In conclusion, while it may seem overwhelming to strive for equal representation women can take immediate steps today by “filling the political pipeline” so there are more qualified women candidates for tomorrow.

Women cannot continue to let income, attitudes, age, family circumstances or intimidation discourage them. At current trends it will take 67 years for women to be fairly represented in the United States Congress. If tendencies don’t soon change, many of us reading this paper today will not live to benefit from what is rightfully ours — balanced gender representation within the most powerful political structure in the world.

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