
Challenges for Women in Politics

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This article looks at some of the reasons that have tended to discourage women from running for elected office and why increased participation is desirable.



In our Canadian Parliament, only 24% of elected parliamentarians are women. In 2007, in Manitoba, we hit the magical number of just over 30% of elected legislators being women. In the 2011 election, however, it fell to 27% - we lost ground. Overall, women hold only about 20% of all seats in parliaments globally. But, it is not just in politics where the numbers of women are low. In Canada, only 10% of directors of public company boards are women, and only 29% of senior managers in Canada are women.

In 1943 a Guide to Hiring Women written by male supervisors during World War II made the following observations:

- Pick young married women. They usually have more of a sense of responsibility than their unmarried sisters, they are less likely to be flirtatious, they need the work or they would not be doing it. They still have the pep and interest to work hard and to deal with the public efficiently.
- When you have to use older women, try to get ones who have worked outside the home at some time in their lives. Older women who have never contacted the public have a hard time adapting themselves and are inclined to be cantankerous and fussy. It is always well to impress upon older women the importance of friendliness and courtesy.
- Give every girl an adequate number of rest periods during the day. You have to make some allowances for feminine psychology. A girl has more confidence and is more efficient if she can keep her hair tidied, apply fresh lipstick and wash her hands several times a day.

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We have come a long way since then – but even in 2013, there is still a way to go. Political life is not easy for everyone – but it continues to be challenging for women. And, what we are seeing today is that women’s progress has stalled. The numbers of women in politics have barely changed in the last decade.

So, women’s representation at these various levels is small – even though women make up 52% of the world’s population: This is called a democratic deficit. This means that when it comes to making decisions that most affect our world, women’s voices are not heard equally.

Does it Actually Make a Difference?

According to the United Nations, a threshold of at least 30% of female legislators is required to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of women. So, at the very heart of this issue is the question of democracy.

If the world is made up of 52% of women, are they well represented if only 20% of their elected representatives are women? The answer would be a resounding “NO” – that there is a democratic deficit.

It matters because women bring a unique experience to the political arena. Their life experiences are different from men’s and their perspectives on issues can be different. This serves to enhance the quality of debate and broaden and balance policy perspectives on a wide range of issues of importance. You get a bigger and broader mix of ideas. It does not mean that women have a better perspective than men – just a different perspective.

Let me give you an example: During the war in Kosovo, Nancy Pelosi, an American legislator, was a member on the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Committee was appropriating billions of dollars for reconstruction of Kosovo. Nancy went a step further. She inquired about the women who had been abused and raped during the conflict. She wanted to know

what happened to these women. She understood that if you do not fix the plight of women – you do not have a family unit and you will never develop a vibrant society. If Nancy had not been there and understood that, the Committee would have just found the money they needed to reconstruct Kosovo. She went further to reconstruct the family.

When I look back over the last couple of decades, I see that there are some issues that have had a sustained push from women legislators. It is women who largely fight for better child care; it is women who fought to address domestic violence; and it is women who fight for better maternal care. Women care about crime and education, taxes and the economy, not to mention conservation, but there are also certain issues which they seemed to have championed. Research shows that in companies where there are more women in leadership roles on boards of directors and on senior leadership teams – the company makes more money!

At TD Bank, women occupy 1/3 of executive and board positions. TD's Chief Financial Officer says this has made the Bank more powerful, flexible, and sustainable. Many of the major banks have gone on to ensure the higher representation of women in their organizations. Manulife Financial has also made great strides forward.

Women in the Workplace Are Not Tokens Anymore

We should not be trying to recruit women into politics just because we hope that will help win certain seats – we are not props. We should be recruiting women because women bring something to the table – a unique perspective that will help make better policy. That should be what it is all about.

It is working towards closing the democratic deficit. And, men are not the enemy. We need to be equal partners with them as we strive to close the gap. There are lots of men out there committed to help us on this journey.

Recently, I was the keynote speaker at a Manitoba conference for women in engineering, sciences, trades, and technology. It was the first conference this group has ever done, and the agenda was on empowering women. While 1 in 4 people in politics are women, only 1 in 11 in the engineering fields is women. They recognize the need to change this imbalance. They are trying to improve these numbers – recognizing that they are way behind. Many other professions have moved ahead to address the gender gap, medicine, for example, but others like engineering, media and finance have not.

Why Should We Look at the Gender Gap?

Gender issues had never been something I focused on in the beginning of my political journey. I never sat around my Caucus table and looked at my colleagues as men or women. I saw us as equals because we all got there the same way. We earned it! We fought for it!

So, gender never factored into my view of the world, but for many it does and it cannot be ignored anymore. Society loses too much if this is left unchallenged. But there are some unique challenges women face. Some I have learned by living them; some I have learned by talking to women from across Canada and across the world; some, I have learned by watching others; and some I have learned through doing a lot of research.

American professor and author Jennifer Lawless, after studying several thousand candidates, found that women are socialized to hold back. That should not surprise too many people. Her findings showed that many do not want to work in a culture of confrontation, do not want their private lives to be made public and worry about their work-life balance. She also found that responsibility for family duties still rest largely with women and that many women have lower levels of self-confidence and political ambition than men. She found that many ambitious, talented women shun running for political office, drop out of high-powered firms, and gravitate to smaller firms or their own businesses or not for profits – places where they can make a difference, that fit better with their personal values and that have cultures more accommodating to a work-life balance.

Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope or confidence

Helen Keller

The issue of self-confidence is an important one. Why do women sometimes feel inferior to men even though we are just as well qualified or more so in some cases? Why do we think we are not smart enough when we may have talent galore? Why do we hold ourselves back and question ourselves when men jump at chances with no second thought? Why do we set up some of these barriers ourselves? There are enough external barriers for women without throwing these internal barriers into the mix.

Most women wait to be asked to get into politics. Then when they are asked, they ponder it and examine

it – and wonder if they are smart enough. Most men do not question their talent at all. They see the opportunity, and they are off and running.

Studies have shown that when women run for office, they win at the same rate as men. Just look at what is happening in Canada today – we have six women premiers. Those glass ceilings have been shattered.

What Can We Do?

There is a whole list of reasons why women do not run for office. Here are a few of them:

- The environment is highly competitive; a blood sport; like football without a helmet. I have grown a new layer of skin for every year I have been in the game.
- Some see politics as biased against women candidates and in many ways it still can be. When women fail there is so much attention paid to that; not so much when men fail. Women tend to be put under a microscope more-so than men are.
- Hilary Clinton's and Sarah Palin's candidacies aggravated women's perceptions of gender biases in the electoral arena. There was a media gender bias.
- Women do not think they are qualified, so they hold themselves back.
- Many women are raised to be less competitive, less confident, and more risk averse than men.
- Women react more negatively than men to many aspects of modern campaigns (eg: negative advertising).
- There is a recruitment gap. Women are asked less often than men to run.
- Women are still responsible for the majority of child care and household tasks.
- Women do not have the same types of networks to access as men do.
- Women find it harder to raise the money required to run than men.

- There are a lot more career opportunities for women today in Canada.
- There is a lack of female political role models.
- When a man is successful, he is liked by both men and women. When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less. Sheryl Sandberg, who wrote the book *Lean In* believes this bias is at the very core of why women hold themselves back. When a man is tough, he is admired; when a woman is tough, she is a bitch.
- Some people do not want to live life in a fishbowl.
- More people want a more balanced life than what politics has to offer.
- Women are judged differently than men where there are children involved. A mother is viewed as being a terrible mother for leaving her children at home for days at a time (with their father) – so that she can go into politics. One rarely hears that being said of a man doing the same thing.
- There is a growing distaste for all that is politics. The cynicism towards politics and politicians is escalating.

Maybe it is time to stop analyzing and over-analyzing the barriers for women. We know what they are. Maybe it is time to start a new conversation!

The culture will not adapt until enough women are in leadership to change it. So there must be a greater effort and focus placed on making this happen. Empowered women can do a lot of things. Did you know that the rise in women's education throughout the world has prevented over four million child deaths from 1970-2009? That is a powerful statistic.

Women, and Party leaders, both need to take more responsibility for change. It will take more women at the top to make the changes that are needed to get more women to the top – you cannot be what you cannot see!