
Is there such a thing as a Women's Agenda in Parliament?

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At most CPA conferences at least one topic on the agenda deals with women in politics. This article considers some strategies needed to get more women elected but says women must go beyond the idea of a separate women's agenda.



The subject of women in politics is a critical area of importance which has evolved since the day women were granted the right to vote. In Canada my province of Manitoba was the first in our country to grant women the right to vote in 1916. It was a hard fought battle. At the forefront was

a woman by the name of Nellie McClung. She was a feisty woman who challenged the Premier of the day who felt that a woman's role was to stay at home and fetch their man his slippers when he came home after a hard day's work.

I do not personally believe that a women's agenda in parliaments or legislatures is helpful for reasons which I will explain but we need a number of strategies that encourage and help get more women into politics. All we have to do is look at the number of elected women serving in our legislatures and parliaments. They tell the story.

In our Canadian Parliament, only 24% of the elected parliamentarians are women. In 2007 in Manitoba we hit the magical number of over 30% of elected parliamentarians being women. In the 2011 election, however, it fell to 27%. We lost ground!

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The under representation of women in the Canadian political system is no different than many other countries. There are different ways to look at why there are not more women in politics. It is easy to blame the system for holding women back – and that is part of the problem – but we also need to ask: Why are not more women running in the first place?

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a nurse or a teacher. I ended up being a nurse. Those were pretty much the only careers I saw to be available to me growing up in a small village in rural Canada. Today, little girls can dream of many different things they want to be. And, politics is not even remotely on their radar! One of the strategies we need to address is how to reach out to young girls and encourage them to dream that politics is a place where they have much to offer.

What are some of the barriers women face that keep them from running? The public, I find, in Canada anyway, is becoming more and more disengaged from politics. Many do not pay attention to it, do not think it affects them, are cynical towards politics and politicians, and do not hold politicians in high regard. Many do not know the issues at election time and cast their vote based on a number of reasons. One woman voted for me because she liked my hair. A family voted for me because I answer my own phone.

Media portrayal of women in politics often does not help. Why should it matter if a woman's purse and shoes match? Politics is seen as a blood sport – and frankly, at times, it can be. Let us not sugarcoat it. The hours can be demanding. The fish bowl life can be unappealing. One day, on a weekend, I went grocery shopping with no makeup and no lipstick. A woman, who I did not know, came up to me and said, "Myrna – you look dreadful! What's the matter with you?" Now – no matter what – I always wear lipstick.

The struggles to juggle family and work can be overwhelming. Some women see all of this and many say, “No thanks.” Many women never consider running unless they are asked. Then when they are asked, they worry that they may not be smart enough or capable enough for the job.

These barriers, and there are many others, are very real and not easily addressed. So why does it matter if there are not many women in politics? Does it make any 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 50% women, are they well represented if only 8% or 28% of their elected representatives are women? The answer would be “NO” – that there is a democratic deficit.

Why does this matter? 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 from men’s. This serves to enhance the quality of debate and broaden and balance policy perspectives on a wide range of issues of importance.

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 the 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 woman – you do not have a family unit, 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.

We need strategies to encourage more women to run. We need strategies to support women when they run and after they win. But – I personally do not believe that a women’s agenda in parliaments and legislatures is a healthy one for women. I think it

does us a disservice. It continues to marginalize us. If women want to be treated as equals, I think we have to compete the same way men do. Men will respect a woman colleague more if she fought the battle and got there the same way he did. If we are given a free pass, we will be forced to prove ourselves over and over again around the caucus table.

Politics is still largely a man’s world. We decided we wanted to be in that world. I think we need to learn to play the game better. Being a woman has not hurt me in politics. I decided I wanted to run. I beat out 2 women and 1 man for the nomination. I have won 5 elections – mostly against men. I am the first female to represent my constituency. I served as Interim Leader of our political party and most of my colleagues are men!

In saying all of this today, I am speaking from my personal perspective and one that evolved for me in Canada. I fully respect the choice of other countries that choose to use quotas or forms of proportional representation. If it works for them, that is great. Some countries in Africa, particularly, have made great strides using quotas.

We have increased the awareness of women’s under-representation in politics. More men are now becoming champions of helping us to change that. They, too, have recognized that under-representation of women creates a deficit leaving half of the population without an adequate voice in political decision making processes. We need to engage them as partners to improve this!

In the end, the debate around the participation of women in politics, while having merit as a “numbers game”, must go beyond that. Today – I would challenge us to move beyond the question of: whether there is such a thing as a women’s agenda in Parliament? Our agenda needs to be the development of workable, sustainable, dynamic strategies to increase women’s participation in the political process.

And a final tantalizing thought: Maybe it should not be about breaking the glass ceiling anymore – but about building a new house. Maybe it is time to redefine the game itself – and to make it ours!