

NEWS



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New Report Identifies Practical Strategies for Encouraging Women's Political Activism

Political Groups Urged to Cultivate Women's Leadership

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) today issued a report outlining strategies to encourage women's political activism and urging groups concerned with social justice to cultivate women's political leadership.

"Women are drawn to help their communities," said Amy Caiazza, Director of Democracy and Society Programs at IWPR and the report's author. "Successful programs provide women something simple and profound: the resources and opportunities to answer their call to speak."

Groups can successfully encourage political activism by providing women ways to feel comfortable expressing anger and outrage in public life, something they are often afraid to do, according to the report titled *Called to Speak*. This activism goes beyond voting and can include trying to influence and negotiate with public officials, building coalitions, and public speaking in political venues such as city council meetings or community forums. The report is based on interviews with some of the most creative and exciting women in community organizing, and reveals six strategies to increase women's leadership.

The six strategies are:

1. Point out role models for women's leadership—in communities, in history and scripture, and in national movements for social change.
2. Provide dedicated space for women to address and explore their discomfort with anger and outrage about politics and political life.
3. Develop opportunities for women to interact and build alliances with women of different racial, ethnic, class, and religious backgrounds.
4. Increase women's confidence with public roles by creating targeted opportunities for them to lead.
5. Provide mentoring for political activism that includes support for women's leadership and political skills development.
6. Consider the ways that women's lives differ from men's, design programs that recruit them where they are, and engage in issues that are relevant to women's lives and well-being.

"Increasing the visibility and influence of women's voices could transform politics at the local and national levels," said Amy Caiazza, Director of Democracy and Society Programs at IWPR and the report's author, "both by contributing stronger support for critical programs and by more fully incorporating women's experiences and concerns into political life. The protests about immigration that we see are a great example

of that. If you look at the pictures of the faces of those protesting, many -- if not most -- are women. These women are outraged about the injustice of our policies. They want to build a more inclusive and mutually supportive society, and we need more voices like this in public life.”

Mary Gonzales, the California Director for Gamaliel Foundation, an international organizing institute building faith-based organizing in the U.S., Canada and South Africa, spoke about a unique program called NTOSAKE, which is transforming women’s leadership by encouraging women to bring their passion and anger into public life. She said, “No woman wants to enter the public arena by herself. Some who have done so have been punished. Being a public person and a woman in this country often makes you a target, and that’s one of the fears that women have, and it’s a justifiable fear.” NTOSAKE encourages women to enter the public arena together.

According to Amy Caiazza, “We found that programs like NTOSAKE that encourage political activism do something that’s truly profound – they move women to confront their fears of authority of being controversial and confrontational, and of being vulnerable to attack. These fears are acute for women... Most of the women that we interviewed said they were involved politically because they felt outrage or injustice. At one point they said they didn’t feel right expressing that outrage. Many women have been told their anger is inappropriate or even sinful; many women feel an obligation to be peaceful and nurturing. Sometimes politics requires confrontation, and to be politically active, women need to be comfortable expressing their outrage in different ways.”

Latifa Lyles, Membership Vice President of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the group’s youngest-ever national officer, talked about the potential in building alliances between religious social justice groups and feminist groups like NOW. She said, “We need to bridge gaps in order to foster new and young leadership and more action. There is an incredible interest in collaboration among young women across religious and cultural lines. We’re very excited to be taking on more projects like this where we can really bring women together in a way that we never have before.”

The three speakers believe that to create a truly inclusive American democracy, we must cultivate women’s political activism and leadership; they hope to build a new movement on behalf of community building and social welfare by bringing in women’s lives and concerns.

Called to Speak is the second report in a series by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. The last report, *The Ties That Bind*, urged political leaders to pay attention to a fresh perspective on “moral values” and public life that religious women activists bring to American politics, religious institutions, and the women’s movement.

To obtain a copy of either report or to schedule an interview with Amy Caiazza, please contact Sharon Lewis at 914-833-7093 or Erica Williams at 831-236-3034 or 202-785-5100. To access an audio replay of today’s news conference, (available through April 17) call 888-203-1112 (replay passcode: 6313480).

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IWPR, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit scientific research organization, also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women’s studies at The George Washington University. IWPR authors the influential “Status of Women in the States” reports, ranking all 50 states and DC on conditions for women. IWPR is online at www.iwpr.org.