When Women Make a Difference

By Karen Shepherd

Former Congresswoman Karen Shepherd is an ardent supporter of the Real Women Run initiative created by the Hinckley Institute of Politics and the YWCA in 2011. Real Women Run is intended to empower women to participate fully in public life and leadership through elected political office at all levels, political appointments, working on campaigns, or simply learning more about the political system. Karen Shepherd was a panelist during the first Real Women Run public leadership training held on January 14, 2012. For more information, please visit www.realwomenrun.org.

Let's not start with politics since politics is so unpopular these days. Let's start with business. According to a 2004 Catalyst paper entitled ‘Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity’ (1) (a research project that collected all of the companies listed on the Fortune 500 list between 1996 and 2000), “The group of companies with the highest representation of women in their top management teams experienced better financial performance than companies with the lowest women’s representation” (p. 2). This was true for both Return on Equity (ROE) and Total Return to Shareholders (TRS). It has long been tested and known that diverse groups make better decisions. And now, any number of academic studies and experience from the workplace support the generalization that women possess the specific combination of interpersonal and work ethic traits that function best in management situations. Women are good problem-solvers and they know how to negotiate and when compromise is required. Obviously, any generalization has exceptions, including this one, but women managers have proven to be more able than men to resolve the conflict embedded in difficult decisions and situations without leaving a trail of grudges that can build into later and sometimes more bitter disputes.

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In other words, the presence of women in business makes a difference and that difference can be measured in financial terms.

The same is true in politics. Full disclosure: I have been an advocate trying to get women elected to office since 1968, the first election in which I was active. There weren't any women running in that election in Utah, and I noticed their absence. In other words, I have been at it for many years, including the decade I spent as the editor of network, a Utah magazine devoted to women who work outside the home, as a community advocate for women’s issues, and as a woman who ran for office and was elected to both the Utah Senate and the U.S. Congress. At my core, I have always believed that having women in office makes a difference. I have believed that almost as fervently as one would believe an article of religious faith. Yet, in the last few years, as I have listened to what many of the women running for and elected to office are saying and have watched what they are doing after they get elected, I have had my doubts. Something has happened that is blocking the changes that women naturally bring to the public forum.

First, let's look at the numbers and think about what they might tell us. Comparing the number of women in Congress to the number of women in other governing bodies in the world is discouraging, even humiliating.

According to the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at the Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics, in 2011, the United States fell to 79th on the world list of countries, in between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Number one is Rwanda whose Parliament is by law 56.3% female because it was thought having women in charge there would bring peace to a land ripped apart by genocide started and perpetuated by men. But Sweden, number four, with 44.7% and Finland, number six, with 43.8%, have long had women in their parliaments and their economies are doing well even in the European downturn. The U.S. Congress, in contrast, is not increasing, but dropping from its peak in the so called “year of the woman”

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1 Catalyst is a national research organization focused on women in business. Using a careful methodology, the study adjusted for name changes and merger and acquisitions activity, and then narrowed the list again to include only companies that had at least four years of information on financial performance, including gender diversity in the top management team. In the end, the study looked at 353 companies. These companies were then divided into quartiles of approximately equal size, based on women’s representation with the top management team and the financial performance of the top- and bottom-quartile companies. Companies were also divided into 11 industry sectors and Catalyst analyzed their performance by industry sector.
in 1992 and now has 90 women, or a comparatively low 16.8%, holding seats in a body of 535 Members. Seventeen women serve in the Senate and 73 serve in the House. In addition three women (who don't vote) serve as Delegates from Guam, the Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia (CAWP, 2012).

The story in state capitals is only slightly more cheerful and their numbers are also sadly decreasing. The Women’s Legislative Network of the National Conference of State Legislatures shows that in 2011 approximately 1,744 women were serving in the 50 state legislatures nationwide, which means just 23.6% of all state legislators are women. In 2010 women held 24.5% of these positions. Finally, in Utah there are 16 women in a body of 104, providing a ratio of 15.3% (“Utah State Legislature”, 2012). Even though the Utah House of Representatives has a woman, Becky Lockhart, serving as Speaker, the ratio is so low that this remarkable victory becomes more symbol than substance, given the overall absence of women in the body.

Breaking down the numbers further (CAWP, 2012; “Utah State Legislature”, 2012), it is interesting to look at party affiliation and gender because the differences are dramatic:

**In Congress:**
- U.S. Senate Republican Women: 5
- U.S. Senate Democratic Women: 12
- U.S. House Republican Women: 24
- U.S. House Democratic Women: 49

**In the Utah Legislature:**
- Utah Senate Republican Women: 1
- Utah Senate Democratic Women: 4
- Utah House Republican Women: 3
- Utah House Democratic Women: 8

I don’t know why women don’t get nominated or elected in any greater numbers than they do in the Republican Party. However, I would note that if we only counted Republican women in Congress, just 5% of the Congress and 4% of the Utah Legislature would be made up of women. It may be fair to state that women have a difficult time getting through the political processes of the Republican Party.

All of this leads me to the particular example of one Republican woman, Olympia Snowe, who is giving up, and whose reasons for leaving the U.S. Senate demonstrate why it’s much more difficult for women to make a difference in office anymore. Olympia Snowe had an important influence on policies that affect women and children because she understood their numbers than they do in the Republican Party. However, I would note that the Republican women in the majority party at the Utah Legislature are so silent on education? What are their competing priorities? Here is a place where women can and often do make a difference, but we live in a state where the Legislature has systematically dismantled the public education system and so reduced its effectiveness that it is no longer a good feeder system into the state’s higher education system. Republican women raised no objection while the Legislature whacked funds for education and diverted a share of them to transportation, refused to consider lowering class size for the first three critical grades, and brushed aside the option to offer Utah children all day kindergarten. The majority party seems to take a certain sense of ideological pride from squeezing the public education system so tightly that it can barely function.

Do the elected Republican women share this pride? Would they have participated in any of this unless the Heritage Foundation and ALEC (The American Legislative Exchange Council) had not persuaded them that it was a good idea to destroy public education and slowly find ways to direct ear-marked education money into the private sector with the long term goal of replacing public education with private voucher funded education? The ultimate affect of this persistent assault on the education system is that today’s children are not getting what they need out of Utah’s schools and as a consequence Utah’s human capital may well be damaged long into the future. Democrats, and particularly, Democratic women, fought fiercely against this war on public education. They fought alone. Meanwhile the children who are in the public schools now and who will be for years to come are inadequately served because they are in a system that has been purposely broken. Was it blind faith in nationally administered ideology that made most of the Republican women in the Utah Legislature turn their backs on Utah’s children or were they doing what they have to do to stay in good standing in the Republican Party?

This brings me to the topic of fear and the populism of special interest groups and other groups of women who are making a difference. Conservative commentator George Will recently said in the middle of the dust-up over the comments Rush Limbaugh made about contraception that politicians were willing to urge the bombing of Iran but were terrified of Rush Limbaugh (Stephanopoulos, 2012). In Utah the same could be said of the Eagle Forum and its figurehead Gayle Ruzicka, who has come a long way since I was in the Utah Senate in 1990 when she sat in the gallery and peered down at the papers on Senators’ desks through binoculars. She was recently featured on the front page of Salt Lake Tribune standing behind a Member on the floor of the House of Representatives. Led nationally by Phyllis Schlafly, the Eagle Forum’s rigid, hard right ideology leaves little flexibility for legislators to work around as they build public education systems, human services policies, diversity plans, sex education curriculum, or tax policies. Almost every issue has to go through the Eagle Forum’s nationally-dictated ideological screen to be deemed fit for passage. The Eagle Forum targets candidates at election time effectively enough that most politicians, especially those in Republican and swing districts, are afraid to cross them. Their Web site is filled with misinformation and disinformation and believers in the religion of the hard
right take all that is published there as truth. Ruzicka and Schlafly have many conservative Republican women followers. Acting as apologists for a harsh right-wing ideology that subjects women and children to an excessive amount of collateral damage, the Eagle Forum provides a critical part of the conservative message and is the female face of the hard right’s ideology.

This brings me to the future and what we can do now. I can imagine a Utah State Legislature where the number of Republican women equals the number of Democratic women. This means there would be four woman Republicans in the Senate and eight woman Republican House Members. That would bring the numbers in both Houses to a more respectable 27% in the Senate and 21% in the House. Then I could hope and imagine that these Republican women would feel support for each other. They would not be as isolated as the few women are now among their male colleagues. When I was in Congress, this strength in numbers (I was elected in the “year of the woman”) gave us the ability to do things women had never been able to do before. I remember how it felt to be a part of the energy of such an effort. It was one of the most exciting, powerful feelings I had while I was in office. The variable, in my case, however, was I was not elected into an atmosphere where a single ideology controlled the Democratic caucus. I did not have to support a specific ideology for my party or for my constituency. All the issues before us were fluid and under discussion. I could and did work with Republican women on issues of mutual concern. Would Republican women in Congress or in the Utah Legislature, in the current atmosphere, have the will and the strength to take off their ideological glasses and look clearly at what they have done and are doing? The hope is that political moderates might be elected so that these women could think beyond ideology. Otherwise it will make no difference at all to elect women. Obviously it would not be helpful to women in Utah to have four (instead of one) hard right ideologically committed women in the Utah Senate working against education and other issues that affect women.

Perhaps the answer to all of this is, as always, the most complicated and messy answer—the answer we least want to hear. We women just have to break through the noise and make people listen if we want anything to happen. There is long list of issues, of course, but this is a short article so I’m going to stick to education. If women who care about education want to rescue the system that’s being decimated in Utah, then they have to get informed and involved. It’s just that simple. To Democratic women, I say step up and get in there in greater numbers like you always have. We need more of you. To Republican women I say please think about the health and education of today’s children as passionately as you think about guns, taxes, free-enterprise, trade missions, and oil leases. The education of children is far more important to us than any of the other items on your list both in human terms and in terms of insuring a prosperous economic future for the people of this state.

Change might be coming, however slowly. The March Democratic and Republican caucuses appear to have been a milestone for broadening the base of people participating in politics because the LDS Church encouraged people to go and to get involved. Will this bring any diversity of thinking into the political mix? Will broadening the base stop the tradition of finding and nominating the most severely conservative candidates (to borrow candidate Romney’s descriptive phrase) and will an ever-shrinking number of voters (why should they bother to vote?) who continue to remain faithful to the Republicans still to elect them to office? If the base does get broadened, will Democrats have more of an opportunity to get elected? Might any of those newly elected Republicans or Democrats be women? Clearly, the more women who try, the better chance there is that there will be. So women must first of all run. I am hoping that this new, broadening level of participation signals an unfreezing of the rigid ideology we have seen in the past 10 years, and I am urging women to take advantage of it and jump into the action. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “My advice to women is to get in the game and stay in the game.” She was right. Sitting on the sidelines gets us nowhere.

Finally, I believe the Republican Party would be a better party if it would be more open to women. It can happen. When I started life in the Democratic Party in 1968, it was closed to women, absolutely closed. We cracked it open in 1972 and all the changes that have happened since have made it possible for women to run and be relatively successful, if not as successful as we all want it to be. If it happened to Democrats, it can happen to Republicans, and when it does, Republican women can make a difference.

If we could really change things and actually elect women to even 30% of the seats in Congress, America could take its place toward the top of the list of countries that include women in their governments. If that were so I believe, just as happens in corporations, all the other benefits of having diversity in governance would kick in. We would soon see policies begin to change so that the quality of public education would improve, the life span would lengthen, infant mortality and maternal mortality would decrease, and access to higher education would broaden. These are all measures where other developed countries are doing much better than we are, and our lower rankings are a collective report card pointing to our inability to work together. Women can work with everyone; they can solve problems; they can organize, be strategic, and achieve common goals. They have done it in corporations and to the benefit of their corporation’s bottom line. Given the opportunity and not bound by strict ideology, they will do it in the country. This is how women can make the difference.

REFERENCES


