

Civically Engaged Mothers of Color and the Challenges of Political Leadership

by Sheneal Parker, Research Fellow

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ABOUT SHENEAL PARKER

Sheneal Parker is a teacher in the Boston Public School system as well as a business owner and community activist. A 2011 Boston City Council (District 7) candidate, Sheneal has organized her community around many issues, from affordable housing to health and obesity. Her passion is to inspire young people to find a pathway to leadership and entrepreneurship. A member of Boston's Ward 4 Democratic Committee and the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, Sheneal also serves on the board of the Bird Street Community Center in Dorchester and on the Community Advisory Boards for Children's Hospital and Wentworth Institute of Technology. As a former board member and board Chair for the Fenway Community Development Corporation, Sheneal was able to advocate for neighborhood improvements and responsible development. She holds a BS in Criminal Justice from Northeastern University, and an MS in Criminal Justice and MPA from Suffolk University. Currently, Sheneal is an EdD candidate in the Leadership in Urban Schools Program at UMass Boston.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

While the ranks of women serving in public office and other political leadership positions are growing, women of color continue to represent a relatively small proportion of elected and other public officials in the United States. Sheneal centered her study on civically engaged mothers of color given that there is limited scholarship available on women of color who are mothers and politically active in their communities. Sheneal wanted to deepen our understanding of the barriers mothers of color face in entering and sustaining a political career.

Her study sought to better understand and analyze:

- How civically engaged mothers of color enter into political careers (including running for office or seeking other positions of political leadership)
- How those in elected or other positions of political leadership sustain their careers

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sheneal developed a research plan that would capture the views, opinions, feelings, and experiences of mothers of color. She conducted a focus group with nine civically engaged mothers of color (both single and partnered) not currently working as elected officials. She also interviewed two state legislators (who are mothers of color) about their life histories; when, how, and why they first became civically engaged; and what has sustained their political careers.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

The women of color who are mothers and civically involved cited a number of factors that encourage and others that discourage entry into electoral politics. Being a parent was not the most significant challenge for civically engaged mothers. However, mothers do seem to wait until their children are school-aged or out of school to consider running for office.

Leadership Development of Young Women of Color

Many women who participated in this study indicated that their leadership development started at an early age. Specifically, the women who participated in the focus group got involved with the community and politics at an early age as their parents took them to the polls. They also had civics and leadership training in high school. This demonstrates the importance of providing opportunities for the engagement of young women in politics at an early age. Most of the women agreed that in order to fill the pipeline of women leaders, it is important to begin early by providing practical, hands-on training aimed at developing confidence and fostering the development of women leaders and allowing them the opportunity to build networks.

Creating a Foundation for Political Influence

Based on her interviews with two elected officials, Sheneal learned that engagement in community work provided an important foundation for seeking elective office. There is evidence that women seek office after spending several years engaged in volunteer work in their communities, and after having been told that they should run by other elected officials or prominent community members as a result of their community involvement.

According to these legislators, support (including financial support and support from other elected officials and prominent community activists) and name recognition were two of the most important factors in their political success. Having access to politically savvy mentors also influenced their willingness to run for office and their success.

For the mothers in the focus group, active involvement in their communities allows them to challenge the status quo and the legacy of racism that has created disparities in health, education, investments, etc. They are recognized as civically active because they ensure that everyone who has been left behind, particularly communities of color, get their fair share.

Challenges to Entry

For civically engaged mothers of color, some of the challenges to enter the political arena include the stigma of being a single parent, the lack of financial resources to run a successful campaign, and limited opportunities for hands-on experience with political campaigns, especially for young women.

Several of the single women in the study indicated that community members have questioned why they don't have a partner or why they are not married in the course of their campaigns. More research is needed to understand the perception of single motherhood as a potentially negative element for women of color candidates.

Most study participants also cited raising money as a significant barrier.

“As an elected official, raising money is always a barrier. As you know, for African-American women, usually we're the fourth group down. It's usually white men, black men, white women, and then black women in terms of raising money.”

Some mothers in the focus group explained that they would not consider running because it would be hard to play the game of politics. For instance, a legacy of elite politicians caused most of the women in the group to second guess themselves. Additionally, several women considered politics to be a “dirty game” with a very limited playing field.

However, these women stated that they would reconsider if able to raise the money and have the tools needed to run a campaign.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Political Action Committee (PAC) for Women of Color

All of the women who participated in the focus group indicated that fundraising was a significant barrier for them. A PAC could be established to encourage more women of color candidates to run for legislative and statewide offices knowing that they have additional funding to support their campaigns.

Political Leadership Programs for Youth of Color

Sheneal's research identified that currently there are limited opportunities for encouraging young women of color to move into the political pipeline. More attention and resources need to be invested in the civic engagement of youth, emphasizing not only the importance of knowing about public affairs and government but also the development of skills needed to lead.

About the Pathways to Political Leadership for Women of Color Project

This project is the result of an innovative research partnership between UMass Boston's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy and the Women's Pipeline for Change. Five women of color active in Massachusetts politics became community researchers to identify barriers, opportunities, and resources of interest to women of color who navigate the pipeline toward elective and appointive office or other public leadership positions. In addition to this project brief, other resources produced by Research Fellow Sheneal Parker may be found on the project website.

Politically Savvy Mentors

This study indicates that having a knowledgeable mentor to answer questions and give advice would make it easier for mothers of color to be successful in politics. They not only need financial support, but politically savvy mentors who can serve as role models, provide advice and guidance, as well as opportunities for hands-on experience in the field of politics.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

The analysis can be used:

- By political trainers and consultants to incorporate in-depth discussions about the challenges and opportunities of motherhood and single parenting with potential candidates
- By youth, community and government organizations to strengthen and expand civic education and engagement opportunities for young women of color
- By political operatives and consultants to develop more systematic opportunities for mentoring civically engaged mothers of color as political leaders and mobilizing resources to support their entry into electoral politics

IMPACT OF RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

Reflecting on how the research fellowship impacted her, Sheneal cited the empowering aspects of the experience:

“As women of color leaders, we often spoke about some of the obstacles we were facing, and I realized that no matter what part of the state you are in, no matter where you live, you are always going to have the same kinds of obstacles as women. We have to get together to support one another. Together we stand and divided we fall. I gained skills, knowledge, resources, a network, and sisterhood from this process. The resources that I received during the fellowship have enabled me to go out there and empower minority women in the community. I hope this Pipeline continues on to bring other women to be part of that tree so we can just branch off all over Massachusetts.”

Visit www.umb.edu/pipeline

for Resources That Inspire, Inform, and Support Public Leadership for Women of Color



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