

Newark's female politicians aim to shatter the glass ceiling

By David Giambusso/The Star-Ledger

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Newark Council President Mildred Crump in a 2008 file. Out of the 34 politicians running in Newark's May 11 election, only 9, including Crump, are women.

NEWARK -- Only nine women have ever served on Newark's city council in the 90 years since women won the right to vote, and none have been elected mayor.

Of the nine, two were appointed to fill a vacancy left by a man, according to the city clerk's records.

In a city where close to 60 percent of active voters are women, Newark's female politicians say the role of women needs to be expanded. But the back room nature of city politics has lent itself to a male-dominated enterprise, despite qualities women say are crucial to good governance.

"The old boy network in politics in New Jersey is extremely strong," said Mamie Bridgeforth, West Ward councilwoman from 1998 to 2006. Bridgeforth and others say that women are generally averse to the back room meetings and under-the-table deals that have governed city politics for decades.

Of the 34 candidates running for office in Newark's May 11 election, only nine are women. Yvonne Garrett Moore and Mirna White are running for mayor, but Moore's campaign has raised less than \$1,000 and White has raised less than \$6,000. In comparison, Mayor Cory Booker has a \$7 million war chest.

Mildred Crump is running for re-election and Charon Motayne, Malkia King, Joanne Miller, Maryam Bey, Carole Graves and Juanita Winslow are running for council seats.

Julie Roginsky, a political operative who has worked with some of New Jersey's top politicians, said the glass ceiling for female politicians is not confined to Newark.

"I think the whole state's behind. It's not just Newark," Roginsky said, pointing out

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that Jersey City, Paterson, and Trenton have also never had a female mayor. Camden's Mayor Dana Redd, is a rare exception. "In the last 20 years we've only had one congresswoman —Marge Roukema," Roginsky added.

are underrepresented in state legislatures

According to a paper released this weekend by Rutgers' Center for Women and Politics, women are underrepresented in cities nationwide and the bigger the city, the worse women candidates fare.

"The proportion of women decreases as city size increases," according to the paper, written by Rutgers professors Susan J. Carroll and Kira Sanbonmatsu.

"While 17.6 percent of cities with populations over 30,000 had women mayors as of January 2010, women were mayors of only 14.5 percent of the 249 cities with populations over 100,000 and 7 percent of the 100 largest cities ... moreover, the proportion of women mayors of large cities has not grown over the past two decades"

One of the biggest hurdles facing women in city politics is simply the fact that there are very few role models.

"You really don't see a lot of mentoring in politics — You really just kind of have to jump in with both feet," Bridgeforth said.

One of the mayoral candidates agreed with Bridgeforth that the nature of Newark politics may discourage some women from getting involved.

"Are there going to be threats? Are there going to be attacks on your family?" said White, a 42-year-old Newark attorney with no children. "Women who have children and families don't want to get involved in that."

Motayne, who is running for a Central Ward council seat, said her family has been the target of vandalism of threats, but she remains undeterred.

"You have a lot of women who have the stomach for this nasty game of politics and I happen to be one," Motayne said.

Crump said it's a shame more women don't seek office in Newark. The city, she said, has produced a generation of women uniquely suited to politics.

"Women traditionally have had to be tougher," Crump said. "Far too often, we have been left to play the dual role in child rearing — the breadwinners, the disciplinarian. Women come to the political arena already toughened. We come as negotiators."



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Mamie Bridgeforth listens to a speaker at a 2006 Newark council meeting.