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# If women ruled the world...

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MORRIS NEWS SERVICE

STORIES ABOUT WOMEN'S

Comedians and pundits sometimes muse about how different things would be if women ruled the world, but there is evidence of what the things would really be like.

Beyond jokes about outlawing raised toilet seats, the best evidence of women's leadership is to look at

where they already have power.

Women hold 24 percent of the seats in state legislatures and 17 percent of the seats in Congress. Women head the U.S. House and five state Houses and four state Senates. In Maine and New Hampshire, they control both chambers.

Experts say many issues related to families, children and the poor receive attention because women in office sponsored bills.

From talking to legislators who have been in office for some time when elected women were fewer, they will say that children, health care and education issues all came to the forefront.

“They saw that those were issues that were not being taken up before women arrived,” said Katie Ziegler, program manager for the Women’s Legislative Network, a nonpartisan clearinghouse sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Research shows elected women are guided by their personal experiences, which leads them to pay attention to issues they perceive affecting their families or the families of others.

“It’s not a partisan thing,” said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. “It’s not just Democratic women. Republican women are more likely than both Republican men and Democratic men to push these issues.”

#### Influenced by experiences

Often, women will run for office on other issues. They may even declare they’re not going to focus on “women’s issues,” but they find that no one else is pushing them either, Walsh said.

For example, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act that allows workers 12 weeks unpaid time off to care for a family member was sponsored by Republican Rep. Marge Roukema of New Jersey. It was originally introduced in 1985 but only finally passed Congress in 1991, when Republican President George H.W. Bush vetoed it then and the next year. Democrat President Bill Clinton signed it into law in 1993.

Roukema has said she was spurred on by her experience of putting aside law school to care for her 17-year-old son who was dying of leukemia before she entered politics.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was the driving force in welding an agreement for the passage of health reform legislation this year, in part, because she’s a woman, according to Walsh.

“She comes to the process as a mother and a grandmother,” Walsh said. “I think it’s not for nothing she ended up being a critical force in the passage of health care because that’s the type of issue you think of women being concerned about.”

#### Actors vs. victims

Men generally hold the perspective of the actors — such as in the case of relaxing regulations to spur executives to create jobs. Females embrace the perspective of the victims — such as the children who could be impacted by the factory emissions resulting from the weakened safeguards.

When it comes to finance, women look at it in terms of consumer protection, while men search for ways to create more activity.

In thinking about national defense, women focus on the victims of wars and ascribe the causes of conflicts to insecurities about resources, experts say.

## Not pushovers

That doesn't mean they're pushovers. The United States' three female secretaries of state, Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton, invested considerable energy in human rights, but all three supported use of military force.

Before them came some tough women prime ministers of other countries, like Britain's Margaret Thatcher, Israel's Golda Meir and India's Indira Gandhi, who led their countries in wars and bucked the notion that a government controlled by women would avoid international conflicts.

## Party trumps gender

The recent rise in the number of conservative women is also shaping notions about how women behave in office. While women are still more likely to reach across the aisle to work with members of the other party — including liberals like Roukema and Maine's U.S. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins — conservatives like GOP vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin and U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., tend to be the ones tossing the firebombs at the other side.

"In a partisan Congress, party trumps gender with few exceptions," said Marie Wilson, founder of The White House Project.

## Less likely to run

Studies show they have an equal chance of getting elected as male candidates, once factors like incumbency and political party are factored out. But since 1894 when Colorado elected the first female legislators, women's numbers in elective office have grown slowly because they are less likely to run.

"They don't think about it every day," said Jane Kidd, chairwoman of the Georgia Democratic Party. "They have to be encouraged and told that they can win."

Various groups have sprung up in recent years to encourage women to run. One of them, The White House Project, was founded by Wilson as a way to provide the training needed to feel confident enough to run.

She wants to build what she calls the critical mass to achieve sizable coalitions so that women can support each other's rise to leadership positions.

"It's important for the women who do serve to support the issues that allow other women to follow, including the full range of health, safety and economic issues that have traditionally kept women out of leadership in politics," she said.

## Exercising power

If women aren't running themselves, their control is felt in the candidates they help elect. The gender gap between presidential candidates going back to 1980 has

fluctuated from 4 percent to 11 percent, with women favoring the Democratic nominee every time.

In that sense, women can exercise considerable power now. Candidates who want their vote have to talk about issues important to women.

Even candidates who don't win the majority of women over often adopt some stances that at least split the women's vote, which leads to incremental progress on the issues they care about.

