

Why Do Few Indiana Women Hold High-Profile Political Seats?

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Politicians, Experts Weigh In On Gender Discrepancy

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INDIANAPOLIS -- All of Indiana's seats in the U.S. House and Senate are filled by men, and Indiana is one of only 12 states that have never had a female governor or senator.

For most of the last 200 years, men have also ruled the halls of the Indiana Statehouse. Women have made big strides in recent decades, but they're still greatly outnumbered in state politics, [6News' Trisha Shepherd](#) reported.

Rep. Mara Candelaria Reardon, D-Munster, is one of the exceptions. She's represented the 12th District in the Indiana House since 2006.

Reardon said she believes women who have political aspirations still face significant barriers in Indiana.

"Absolutely, like I said when I was running, it was about who could take care of my children," she said.

Sen. Beverly Gard, R-Greenfield, said Indiana politics often has a boys' club atmosphere, but she feels respected.

"I think the women here are very well-accepted and respected," Gard said. "We're really outnumbered, so in that respect, it's a little bit of a boys' club."

Women who were elected overcame the first and perhaps the largest barrier -- deciding to run. Often, the sometimes ugly nature of campaigns is cited as the largest obstacle in recruiting female candidates.

"Women have a lower tolerance for the negativity, the partisan attacks that occur in the kind of campaigns that we see nowadays," said Dan Parker, Indiana Democratic Party chairman.

Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman, the state's highest-ranking female politician, said she believes more women should run to counterbalance men in powerful positions.

"I can recall some of my earliest days in the Indiana Senate when some individuals, just in passing, would say, 'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?'" Skillman said. "That was offensive to me. I treated it with humor but explained if good people don't become involved in the political process, to whom are we leaving the government?"

Reardon said that while women often cite family obligations in decisions to stay out of politics, it's possible to do a good job at both. She credits her husband with helping her balance politics and parenthood.

"Children are resilient, and children adapt," she said. "They know mommy is doing very important work, and they're very proud of me."

Rutgers' Center for American Women and Politics has done extensive research, finding that women are less likely to decide on their own to run for office and more likely to wait to be invited.



Rep. Peggy Welch, D-Bloomington, said she was asked to run.

"Studies show women tend to say, "Oh no, can I really do it? Am I smart enough? Am I capable enough?" Welch said. "Right or wrong, men just think they're born to be leaders."

About 20 percent of lawmakers in the Indiana Statehouse are women, putting Indiana 32nd in the country in terms of female representation.

Parker said his party actively recruits women to run for office, adding that he wants more to seek local offices.

When women decide to run, a Howard University researcher said, they are just as likely to win if the seat is open.

"I think we have support amongst women, and I think that there are some men who are progressive and very supportive," said Rep. Cherrish Pryor, D-Indianapolis. "I think as long as we're still talking about a woman first president, a woman first governor, we're still far behind."

By all accounts, strong role models are crucial to helping girls and young women dream big and follow through.

"That's what we have to do to help each other is we have to say to other women, 'You can do this. You can be a leader. Come on and join us,'" Welch said.

Skillman said she never felt gender was a barrier to her. Yet, she appeared poised to run for governor and stepped out of the race.

Skillman said firmly that she decided not to run because she didn't want to take on a 10-year commitment of campaigning and two potential terms in office.

"In the end, these decisions are always personal, and I don't think there's anyone who can say I've abdicated my responsibility after being in public service for 34 years," she said.

Senate Minority Leader Vi Simpson's name has been floated as a potential candidate for governor in 2012, and political insiders said there's a good chance Republican candidate Mike Pence could be paired with a female lieutenant governor candidate.