



# From Rosie to Kamala— Breaking Down Barriers for Women in Public Service



When you think about powerful women in powerful jobs, you might picture Rosie the Riveter, a “blast from the past” image of a woman taking on industries traditionally dominated by men.

Rosie was and continues to be a symbol of strength and resilience, telling women—particularly women in the workforce—that they can break down barriers, lead with purpose, and bring about meaningful change.

Her phrase “We Can Do It” has evolved into a powerful symbol of confidence, reminding women that they can tackle challenges and lead with determination.

Just like Rosie used her image to [drive women to join the workforce during World War II](#), women in public service are using their unique perspectives to drive policy, advocate for equality, and shape the futures of their communities and beyond under their leadership.

And that leadership is desperately needed. As you read in [ACS' What to Watch: Part 2](#), when women hold public service positions, policies impacting women and girls gain critical attention and support. When they don't...well... we've all seen [glimpses into what will happen](#).

Keep reading to learn how biases—whether racial, gender, media, or otherwise—create barriers that affect everyone, and how women can channel their inner Rosie to break those barriers down.

Government policies—those already in place and new ones coming out daily—are just layering on the systemic barriers women face every day, whether they are in the workforce or not. Some of these government actions (and inactions) include:

**Weak anti-violence laws.**

More than 50 percent of U.S. female homicides occur during domestic violence, with half involving firearms. In one study, stronger gun laws were associated with fewer incidents of domestic firearm violence when compared with weaker gun law states<sup>4</sup>.

**Lack of pay equity laws.**

Women earn 82 cents for every dollar that men earn.<sup>1</sup>

**Increased abortion restrictions.**

As of December 20, 2024, 18 states had outlawed abortion or significantly restricted it<sup>3</sup>.

**Insufficient parental leave.**

The United States is one of the few developed countries without guaranteed maternity leave<sup>2</sup>, forcing women to choose between career and family.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/01/the-enduring-grip-of-the-gender-pay-gap/#:~:text=The%20gender%20pay%20gap%20-%20the,80%20cents%20to%20the%20dollar>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karadennison/2023/11/13/how-us-family-leave-policies-can-catch-up-with-the-rest-of-the-world/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/dashboard/abortion-in-the-u-s-dashboard/>

<sup>4</sup> Shipley, J., Donnelly, M., Kuza, C., Grigorian, A., Swentek, L., Chin, T., Brown, N., Nguyen, N., & Nahmias, J. (2024). Domestic firearm violence against women (2018-2021). *Surgery open science*, 17, 75–79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sopen.2024.01.010>

ACS views public service careers as any elected or appointed role in which an individual serves at the pleasure of the voters and/or community. We tend to think of public service careers as those held by people who win political office at the state or federal level, but there are also critical public service positions such as local city council members, county commissioners, auditors, prosecutors, and treasurers, as well as public school board members and superintendents. All play a key role in the public service ecosystem, representing nearly every community across the country.

ACS is honored to have worked for and with many incredible women in public service careers. Look for their “Words of Wisdom” throughout this eBlast! Our contributors include:



### **Alison Bibb-Carson**

- Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at College Now, Cleveland, OH
- School Board Member, Shaker Heights, OH



### **Erica Crawley**

- President, Board of Commissioners, Franklin County, OH



### **Jenny Spencer**

- Ward 15 City Council Member, Cleveland, OH



### **Joan Wagnon**

- Retired, Topeka, KA
- Legislator, Kansas House of Representatives (1983–1994); Mayor of Topeka, Kansas (1997–2001); Secretary of the Kansas Department of Revenue (2003–2011); Chair of the Kansas Democratic Party (2011–2015)

## **Words of Wisdom**

*“Being a leader isn’t magic; it’s work. But if you’re grounded in service and know what’s right and do the right thing—then truly, anyone can lead and serve.”*

**– Alison Bibb-Carson**

*“When I was growing up, the only careers open to women were teacher, nurse, or homemaker. Women generally did not serve in public office and there were few role models as doctor, lawyer, judge, etc. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to the change in expectations that women could be whatever they chose.”*

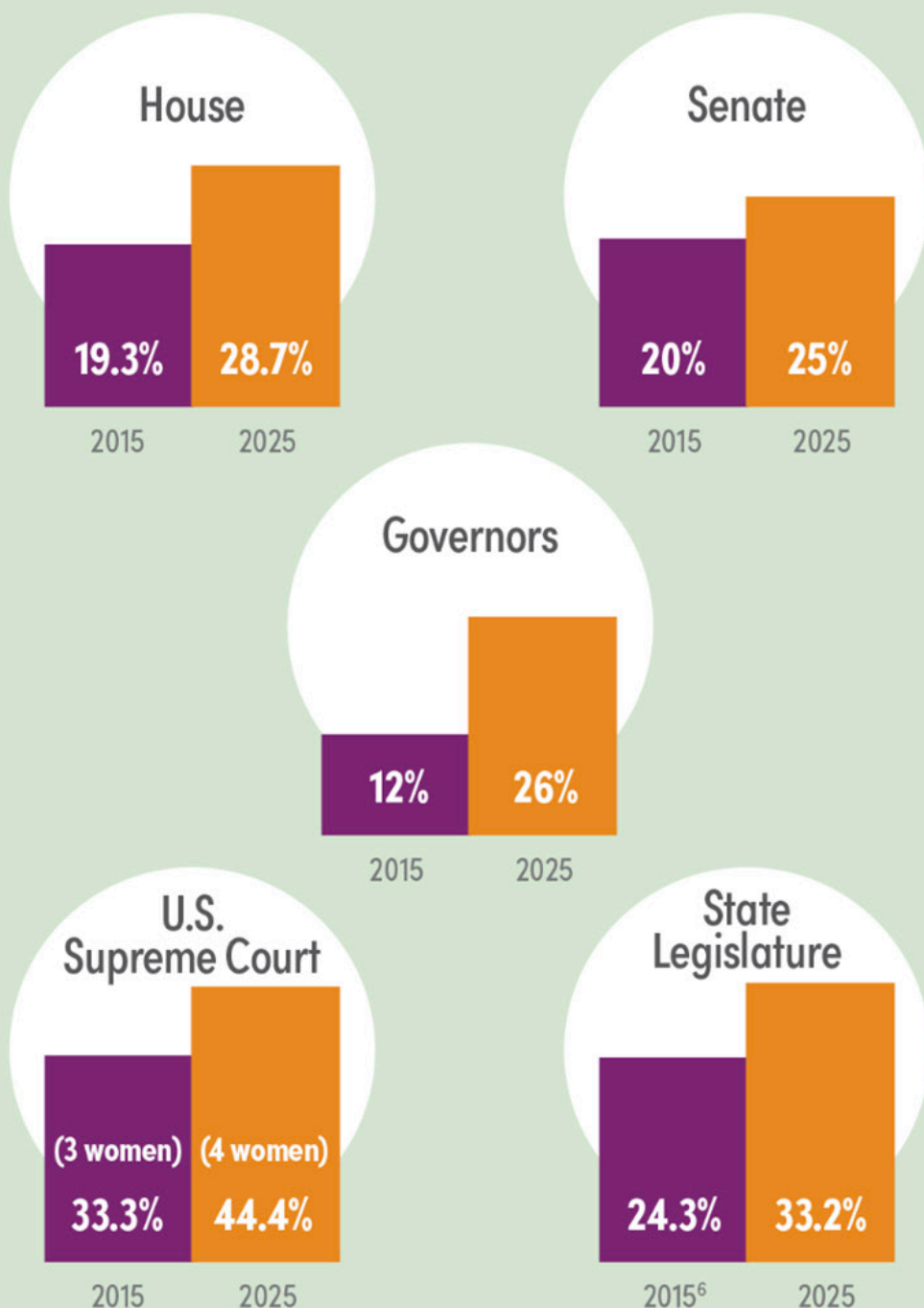
**– Joan Wagnon**

# Women Support Women

Research shows that states with more women in leadership tend to pass more women-friendly policies. And although U.S. voters have (STILL) failed to elect a woman president, 2025 will be a record-breaking year for women, who will hold an unprecedented 28.7 percent of U.S. House seats and 25 percent of Senate seats. At the state level, women have assumed 13 governorships and hold 33.2 percent of seats in state legislatures across the country.<sup>5</sup> While these statistics seem impressive, not all are drastically different than they were 10 years ago.

<sup>5</sup><https://cawp.rutgers.edu/blog/congressional-statewide-results-women-2024>

## Women's Representation in U.S. Government Roles: 2015–2025



<sup>6</sup>[https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/women-in-state-legislatures/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/women-in-state-legislatures/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

While these gains reflect progress for women across the nation, they also highlight the ongoing need for increased representation of women in public leadership roles. Huge challenges remain that must be addressed, and an inclusive environment must be created so women not only survive but *thrive* in public service careers.

## Words of Wisdom

*"Overcoming the barriers I faced, both as a single mom and as someone navigating a career in public service, has not been easy. There have been countless moments of doubt, rejection, and frustration. But I've always believed in the power of persistence and the importance of representation. I understood that my voice, my lived experience, and my perspective mattered—especially when it came to advocating for policies that could positively impact families like mine. I sought mentorship, leaned on my community, and stayed committed to the belief that every challenge I faced was an opportunity to make a difference."*

**– Commissioner Crawley**

*"Efforts to recognize women's accomplishments are important—whether it is an annual award, or just a mention in a workplace event—because they allow others in the workplace to see the accomplishments of women. It creates an aspirational goal for younger women."*

**– Joan Wagnon**



## The ACS Fund for Women & Girls

In 2024, ACS Co-Founders Lori McClung and Scarlett Boudier started the ACS Fund for Women & Girls to celebrate the company's 20th Anniversary. The Fund focuses on providing low-income women and girls—particularly those of color—with increased access to reproductive justice, higher education, and pathways to elected office.

Thank you to those who contributed generously to the Fund last year, allowing us to make \$42,000 in grants to three organizations in December 2024—[The Matriots](#), [Preterm](#), and [Say Yes Cleveland](#).

Now that new federal and state leadership is seated (read more on the effects this new leadership is having in [ACS' Newsletter What to Watch: 2025, Part 1 and Part 2](#)), the work of the ACS Fund is more important than ever. Please consider supporting this work with your financial contribution to the [ACS Fund for Women & Girls](#).

# You Should Smile More... But Not Too Much

In the 2016 presidential race, Hillary Clinton faced a barrage of harsh scrutiny and stereotypes that her male counterparts did not. In this article from [The Guardian](#), Clinton's former aide recalls daily criticism of Clinton, many of which were tied to her gender—her voice was too loud or annoying; her clothing choices were either too bright or not bright enough; and one particular piece of advice that Clinton look at a picture of her granddaughter when speaking to prevent her from “looking so angry.” These comments are just a few examples of the hurdles that remain a persistent challenge for women in public service roles—hurdles that their male counterparts do not normally encounter.

In the article, [\*Presidential pretty privilege: Why the physical appearance of politicians matters\*](#), author Kesenia Goldstein notes, “Female politicians are scrutinized at much higher proportions than men regarding physical appearance, often to the point of harassment or ridicule. Double standards of professionalism and perfection leave their hair and clothes as easy targets for those seeking to tear down women in politics.”

Even before her historic presidential run in 2024, Vice President Kamala Harris was on the receiving end of the sexism, media scrutiny, and public criticism faced by women—and particularly women of color—in leadership roles. The article [\*How will sexism impact Harris's presidential campaign?\*](#) confirms the attacks, noting, “...conservative commentators have suggested that Harris ‘slept her way to the top,’ a trope that also reflects sexualized stereotypes about women in politics, especially women of color.”

Similarly, cultural and societal perceptions of women in leadership are seen through gendered-colored glasses, with women sometimes viewed as less authoritative than males, and therefore “less deserving” of public service leadership positions, no matter how much they try to make the discussion NOT about gender.

## Words of Wisdom

*"Women belong in the rooms they desire to walk into, and that's something I hold close to my heart. The outdated idea that our place is only in the kitchen is not just antiquated—it's a stereotype that doesn't reflect the powerful, capable women leading in every sector today. I've navigated many, many stereotypes in my role, and I know the weight that comes with being the first to do something—especially when that something has been reserved for others for so long.*

*It took 220 years for me to become the first Black woman elected as [Franklin] County Commissioner, and the road has not always been easy. But in those moments when bias or doubt is thrown my way, I remind myself of my purpose and my power. I work every single day to show people that not only am I qualified, but I am more than qualified to serve."*

– **Commissioner Crawley**

*"I have found it is best to confront stereotypes or biases, pointing them out and suggesting other alternatives. Sometimes people aren't aware of subtle biases; identifying them in a non-threatening manner can be effective."*

– **Joan Wagnon**

## Qualified and Competent, But Racism Persists

When it comes to women of color, those gender-colored glasses get worse.

The New York Times article [\*Kamala Harris and the 'Double Bind' of Racism and Sexism\*](#) describes how women of color in public service careers are oftentimes turned into one of the oldest racist tropes—the “angry Black woman”—and are being labeled as “unlikable” (“likable” being something voters see as mandatory for women and not men), a trait that greatly diminishes their chances of being elected.

In the NYT article, Nadia E. Brown, an associate professor of political science and African American studies at Purdue University, says this trope is aimed at emasculating Black women. “These are distinctly misogynoir tactics,” Dr. Brown said, referring to the combination of racism and sexism that Black women face. “We would not see these stereotypes or these kinds of threats used against her if she were not a Black woman.”

And there are numbers to back this up. [\*One 2020 study\*](#) found that Democrats rated women and people of color as less “electable” than their white, male counterparts, despite more often being the preferred candidate in a hypothetical matchup. This “prefer vs. pick” paradox is known as [\*strategic discrimination\*](#)—when an individual hesitates to support a candidate out of concern that others will object to the candidate’s identity... in the case of the 2024 election, a woman of color running for president.

The Trump administration's recent elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives—historically aimed towards promoting equal opportunities, supporting career advancement, and fostering inclusive workplaces for underrepresented groups, including women of color—will only increase the challenges women face. The long-term effects of DEI's removal from organizations and institutions remains to be seen, particularly in public service sectors. But if federal agencies being directed to identify and eliminate DEI-related roles is any indication, workplace inequality, barriers to career advancement, and systemic discrimination will only get worse. This is especially true in public service sectors, where DEI programs have historically played a role in fostering inclusivity.

## Words of Wisdom

*"I have been surprised at the need to continue to overcome gender stereotypes and biases. I've noticed subtle and not-so-subtle behaviors, such as men talking over women colleagues, or not giving their full attention to women during floor speeches. I've had a few 1:1 conversations with my male colleagues when I've seen this, but I need to have more. Council still has an overall culture of a 'boys' club'—where men are automatically in, but women are not as easily included."*

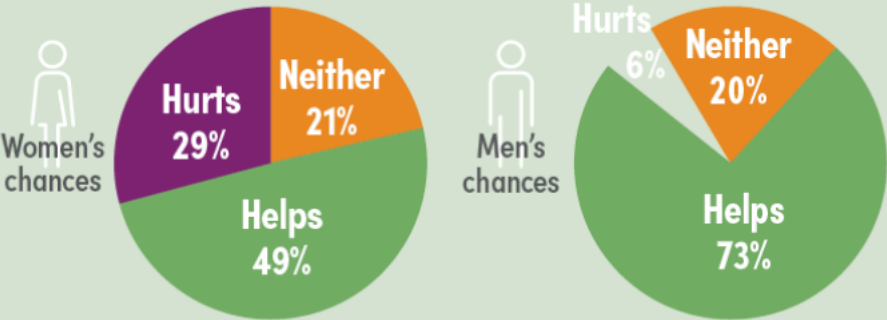
– Jenny Spencer

This tightrope that women walk when running for public service roles seems like a lose-lose situation, where having children or personality traits like assertiveness or showing emotions seems to hurt their chances of election while it benefits their male counterparts, as evidenced by this [2023 Pew Research survey](#) that asked Americans how certain traits impact a man's or a woman's chances of getting elected to high political offices.

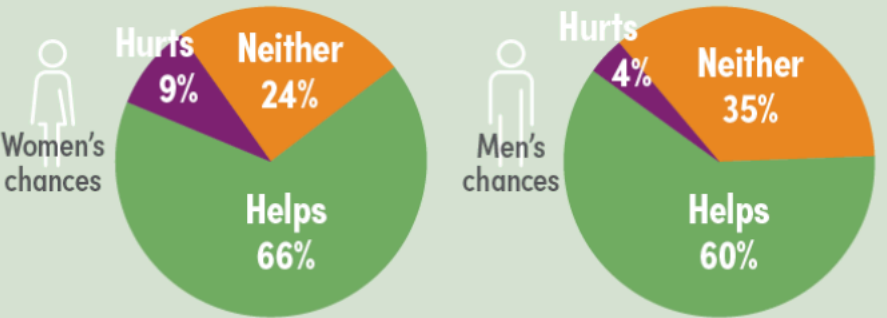
## Women vs. Men: How Traits Hurt or Help Chances of Election

% saying that, in general, each of the following \_\_\_\_\_  
a man's and a woman's chances of getting elected to high political offices

### Being Assertive



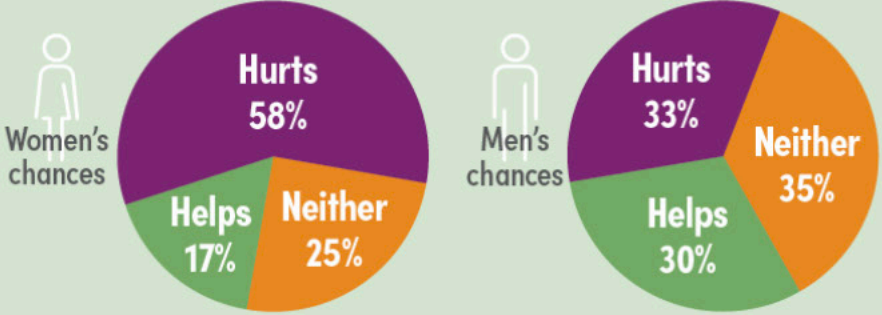
### Being Physically Attractive



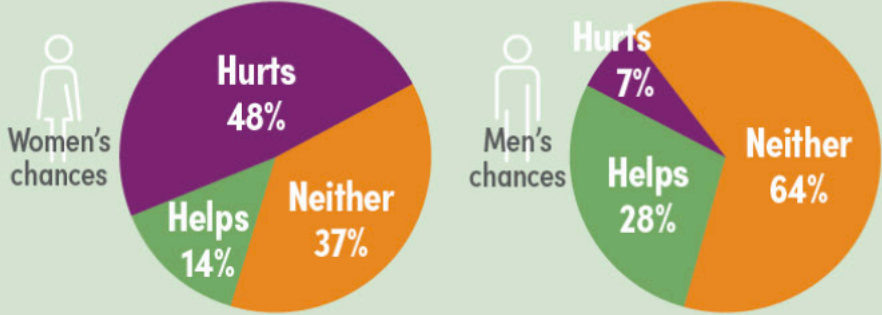
**Being Younger Than 50**



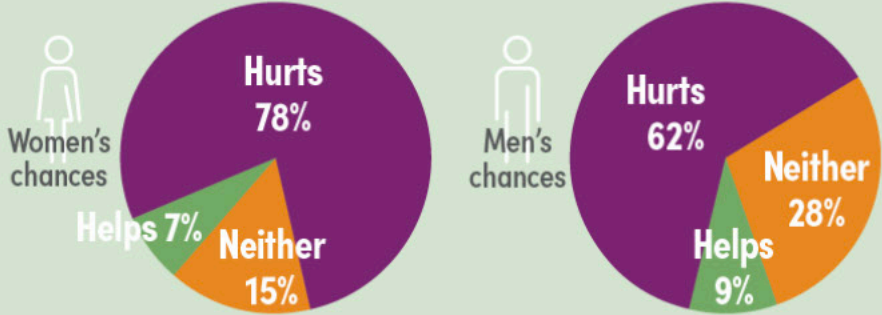
**Showing Emotions**



**Having young children at home**



**Not having experience in elected office**



**Not being married**



**Being older than 70**



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown. Figures include those who say each trait hurts or helps a lot or a little.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 17-23, 2023. "Women and Political Leadership Ahead of the 2024 Election."  
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Words of Wisdom

*"Not only do we need more women in office, but we need parents, too. As one example, two of my Council colleagues—one who is a woman and another who is a male parent of young children—came together to create legislation to completely reform the City of Cleveland's paid parental leave policy. Dozens of Cleveland employees have already been able to take advantage of this new policy, which is helping us attract more talent to the City as well as create the conditions of equity for all of us."* – **Jenny Spencer**

## It's Time We Build a More Inclusive Future

Women in public service are reshaping this country, but there is still a lot of work to be done. Equality in public service careers (and beyond) won't happen on its own. To support the next generation of women change-makers, we must advocate for policy reforms that promote gender equality in public service and actively work to ensure that women have equal opportunities by implementing policies and practices that address systemic gender biases and promote equitable access for ALL citizens, regardless of gender or color.

## Words of Wisdom

*"Generally, women understand the concerns of other women. Being mindful of offering support to women and girls—for instance, providing free menstrual supplies to girls in schools—is one way. Realizing that child care is needed at evening meetings is another."*

– **Alison Bibb-Carson**

*"Supporting women of color in public service means more than just giving them a seat at the table—it's about providing the tools, resources, and mentorship to help them thrive. When we amplify their voices, we not only create more opportunities for them, but we also shape a more just future for everyone. It's time to put women of color at the forefront of leadership and ensure their perspectives are valued and heard."*

– **Commissioner Crawley**

*"Women are still underrepresented in almost all sectors, and that's certainly the case in elected office. I absolutely believe that women hold an advantage in terms of our ability and appetite for collaboration—traits that are badly needed in public service."*

– **Jenny Spencer**



Global initiatives like the [UN Women's HeForShe Campaign](#) promote gender equality by engaging men and boys as allies in the fight for women's rights. In the United States, organizations like [Equal Rights Advocates](#) and [National Women's Law Center](#) work to promote gender equality in public service through advocacy, policy reform, and legal support.

At a local level, individuals can engage in community activism, promote (and vote for!) diversity in leadership roles, and educate themselves on systemic issues that can drive meaningful change.

Systemic barriers for women persist—especially for women of color—in public service careers and beyond. To drive long-term change, we must work to dismantle these barriers and create a more inclusive and equitable future for all. And we must ensure that the next generation of girls can see themselves in public service roles.

As Rosie says, We Can Do It.

## Words of Wisdom to the Next Generation

*"Get up. Ask questions. Be skeptical. Be active in any way you can to make your community better by doing what interests you in helping others. Public service is not only about a title or a position, though we need women of color leaders to run for public office or lead nonprofit organizations. Do whatever you can. Speak with your neighbors about a concern. Clean up your neighborhood. Support other women. Buy local. Pass it on."* – **Alison Bibb-Carson**

*"To the next generation of women, especially women of color, I would say—go for gold. Chase your dreams, your hopes, and your ambitions like there's no tomorrow. You are the solution to the challenges we face. You have the potential to bring the change that's needed, and the world—your community—needs you. Residents, constituents, and even the world are waiting for your magic to happen."*

*Your voice, your experience, and your perspective are your superpowers. Trust in those. Keep pushing, even when it gets tough, because your journey will inspire others to do the same. You have the capacity to create systems and solutions that make real, lasting change. And I believe in you—just as I believe in every woman who dares to step up and step into public service. Your moment is now."*  
– **Commissioner Crawley**

*"I would encourage women to not talk themselves out of opportunities as they arise. We need to build a pipeline of the next generation of leadership."*  
– **Jenny Spencer**

*"Do your homework to understand fully the office you seek, whether elected or appointed. Always reach out to other women to help them advance when you have a chance. Make as many friends as you can."* – **Joan Wagnon**

### Want more?

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