

Get Your Name on the Ballot

By: Hanna Grimm

Representative Ashton Clemmons (D-Guilford) wasn't planning on running for office. When she showed up at lunch for community organizers with plans to recommend other women she felt should run for office.

"When they asked me my first thought was what most women's first thought is and it was: yeah, I can't do that right now," said Clemmons. As an assistant superintendent and mother to three young children, it didn't seem plausible, but the more she thought about it the more she knew she wanted to try

So, she ran and won. And since then, she has been dedicated to helping pass policy about issues like education, where her personal and professional experience come together.

In North Carolina, women make up [51.4 percent of the population, but only 26 percent of the General Assembly](#). This disparity means that women do not have an equal voice in the legislature, and that has a major impact on critical decisions being made about policy. Especially, those in areas like healthcare, education and equal pay, that surveys show are more important to women voters.

When women are underrepresented in government and leadership, issues are overlooked. For example, when a child is born it is often a woman who takes off work, and in North Carolina there is no standard of [paid family leave](#). But, this gender gap in North Carolina politics – and across the nation – isn't caused by a lack of qualified candidates. We don't have enough women entering the races because there are too many barriers.

Too often, women don't put themselves forward as candidates. And party leaders fail to actively recruit women to fill in the gap. When women do decide to run, we have trouble finding the financial, emotional and staff support to build a winning campaign.

We need to create organizations that actively identify talented women to run for office and provide them with the resources and encouragement to do so, starting at the grassroots level. Most importantly, all of us need to start thinking about ourselves and our friends as candidates.

The barriers that stand between women running – and winning – are complex. They are psychological, structural and financial.

[According to Pew Research Center](#), seven out of 10 women feel they are underrepresented because they feel they have to do more to prove themselves as candidates and leaders. The gender gap in political leadership isn't because of a lack of qualified candidates. It is because we need to create a significant shift in the way we approach talking to women about running for office.

"Women have this feeling of fear or worry or anxiety or can I do this?" said Clemmons. She actively tries to recruit women from both parties to run for office. Often women feel held back,

she says, because they believe they don't know enough about a single issue like healthcare, so they are reluctant to run.

But women, just like men, don't have to be an expert on the nuance of every policy in order to immensely contribute legislation. Only women have the insight to determine what policies are actually beneficial, said Ann Marie Ingram, a junior studying political science and public policy at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"It is important to have people in power that look like me and have similar interests as mine," said Ingram. "As much as someone can try to learn about another's experience, you can't ever know everything that someone else has gone through. So, I think the risk of having a huge disparity in gender representation is that women's interests are not represented."

Women are encouraged to run for office 40 percent less frequently than equally qualified men, according to [a study by Meredith College](#). Party officials are not seeking out qualified women to run for office from a grassroots level and providing them with the organizational and financial support to run for office, says the report.

On average, a women will have to be asked [seven times](#) in order to make the decision to run for office. Says the report. Therefore, it is imperative that the structures are put in place to identify the women who are leaders in their communities and bring them the idea of running for office.

UNC-CH senior Mary Galey's passion for politics was ignited by watching her mother run for County Commissioner of Alamance County.

"We need to set up organizations that help women run by funding women running and identifying that talent from a grassroots standpoint," said Galey. "It takes going into communities and finding who the local community leaders are. Who are the women who are stepping up in their churches, law firms and businesses?"

Organizations that do this already exist, but there needs to be more. For example, Lillian's List is a North Carolina-based nonprofit that provides financial and organizational support to female candidates.

"We provide recruiting and training programs that are designed for candidates and potential candidates," said Sarah Preston, Executive Director of Lillian's List. "But we also have trainings for campaign staff and for campaign volunteers so that we can make sure that a candidate – once she decides to run – can also find professional staff and have a good team of volunteers around her."

A well-informed and competent staff is critical for the success of any campaign, but a candidate can't even get herself on the ballot without a certain level of financial support. Preston said that fundraising challenges for women start from the political pipeline. When starting at the grassroots level, most campaign fundraising occurs from the candidate personally calling donors and pitching her vision for the community.

“Traditionally, a lot of women who run for office are coming from an education, social work or nonprofit background. Essentially, career paths where they might not have had exposure to networks of wealthy people,” said Preston.

For women, this can be very uncomfortable, especially if they are from a background where their colleagues, friends and family might not be particularly wealthy.

“Like the idea of calling a teacher - who is having to work two jobs - and asking for a couple hundred dollars is something that is really hard,” said Preston.

The underrepresentation of women in politics doesn't have a clear-cut or easy solution. It is rooted in centuries of disenfranchisement and conditioned by stereotypes of gender roles. But by encouraging women in their runs for office and making sure the money is there, we make steps in the right direction.

And the next time you hear a qualified friend make a comment on policy or the state of the community – tell her to run for office or better yet, put your name on the ballot.