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Women in Public Administration



What About Women?

President Abraham Lincoln proposed a fresh standard for democracy when he uttered his hope that, “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.”

The Gettysburg Address is considered one of history’s greatest speeches. But, I would humbly make a small change: Insert “all”—a government of *all* the people, by *all* the people and for *all* the people. I learned that the writings of Theodore Parker, a minister whose work included abolition and women’s rights issues, had inspired Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg. Parker’s original work and notion of democracy were *all* people—that is, inclusion before it became popular.

At ASPA’s 2018 Annual Conference, we wrestled with inclusion on the presidential panel titled, “Inclusion in Public Spaces.” Following a string of high-profile instances of public administrators navigating the question issue of Confederate symbols, we three panelists focused some of our comments on issues of race. Before the discussion ended, two women—one white, one black—raised the question, *what about women?*

I stand by the answer I gave: *We always must be deliberate about who sits at the table of influence. Seek diversity, in all its combinations.* That said, this nation has never dealt seriously with its original sins—slavery and genocide—so we as public administrators and educators must increase our comfort with inserting race in public policy discussions and lesson plans.

Even when we consider only women, add race. Historically, the suffrage movement was about white women, a point emphasized in Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” As the 15th Amendment gave voting rights to black men (in theory), some white suffragists opposed it. By 1920, the Constitution granted women ballot box privileges. Nearly 50 years would pass before African Americans and others were furnished the vote through the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

White women have been ahead ever since. Although white men dominate most job categories in local and state government, according to 2015 federal statistics, white women maintain a presence and sometimes lead white men numbers employed in government agencies. White women also lead women of color in every job category. According to the Reflective Democracy Campaign’s WhoLeads.us report, white men and white women hold 65 percent and 25 percent of elected offices, respectively, compared with men of color and women of color who hold seven percent and four percent.

These statistics reveal a troubling power dynamic, but we must still pursue a government for *all* people. As public servants, we must accept the truth that government has given advantages to some based on race. We must understand that these policies and practices have enduring consequences in our communities today.

Because government—those hired and elected—rarely reflects our diverse society, we must deliberately engage the broader community, including the under-represented and those isolated by race and income. We must hold public meetings in different neighborhoods, at different times, in different formats. We should explore new ways of gaining feedback, from mobile phone surveys to neighborhood walks. This must occur often, not merely periodically or during election season.

When creating public policy, we must identify who *isn’t* included in this discussion. How can we hear from more people? What do the disaggregated data—by race and gender—show? How will people of color be affected, now and in the future? Who will benefit or be hurt by this policy? How can we change the policy to address longstanding inequities? White women are uniquely situated to ask questions and press for meaningful responses as they are more likely than people of color to sit at the table but may have experienced exclusion themselves.

Two approaches can trigger these changes. Mine can be symbolized by adding a leaf to the dining table to expand the size and conversation. For a second, I turn to the late Shirley Chisholm, who earned her place in history as the first African-American woman elected to Congress and the first African-American to seek the presidency through a major political party. Chisholm, whom I met when I was a young reporter, said, “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”

The wisdom of Chisholm and Truth is relevant in the age of “#MeToo” and “Time’s Up.” Chisholm instructed us, “You don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas.” And, Truth reminded us, “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!”

Let’s get to it.

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