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Political Motivations of Women of Color Leaders: Existing Challenges

by *Martina Cruz, Research Fellow*

Project Brief 5 of 5 | June 2013

ABOUT MARTINA CRUZ

A former bilingual pre-school teacher, Martina Cruz grew up in the Dominican Republic and has been a trusted community organizer and leader who supports labor struggles, progressive candidates, and women, Latino and immigrant empowerment issues across the Commonwealth. A mother of three children with learning disabilities, she is especially committed to helping families become self-sufficient and advocate for their own needs with schools and agencies. Martina's dedication to quality public education is reflected through her service as an elected member of the Lawrence School Committee from 2005 to 2011. She holds a BA in Human Services from Springfield College and a Child Development Associate certification from Revere College.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

Women of color are underrepresented in political office at multiple levels of government, from school committees to governorships nationwide. Women of color who are active in their communities have important qualities, perspectives, and experiences that are necessary in public policymaking settings that affect their communities. Yet many women of color who are well-known and respected in their communities do not seek elective office.

Martina sought to better understand factors that discourage women of color leaders from running for political office. Her project is important as it seeks to inform strategies to encourage more women of color in Massachusetts to run for office and identify resources that women of color need to do so. Martina's study addressed an essential question regarding the political leadership of women of color: Why don't women of color community leaders run for political office?

RESEARCH DESIGN

In-depth interviews were conducted with ten women active in their communities who have not pursued political office. The sample was strategically selected to allow for analysis of potential differences between the political environment of Lawrence, Massachusetts and that of other cities: five were from Lawrence and five lived in other communities in Massachusetts (Springfield, Jamaica Plain and Brockton). Among those interviewed six women were Dominican, three were Puerto Rican, and one was African American.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

The women interviewed, who are leaders in their workplaces and communities, identified a desire to create a voice for families and effect change in their communities. These women of color leaders are recognized for their strong and consistent work in their community serving as advisors, mentors, connectors, educators, advocates, or organizers. There is general acknowledgment that these women are deeply committed to the advancement and well-being of their communities.

While they all believe that political leadership is important, the women in this study explained that certain conditions would have to be met before they would consider running for office. In their interviews, the women emphasized the themes of community, values, and resources.

Community Activism and Values

Many women became active in their communities at a young age and community involvement had become a central part of their lives and identity. Yet several women spoke about their concern that running for elective office could result in the loss of their activism in their community. Several women explained that they thought they could do a better job as a community activist than as a public official.

Their interviews demonstrated that values — particularly honesty and respect — were important to them. The women felt strongly about not compromising on these values.

Many women had first-hand experiences with public dishonesty or corruption in the political environment which made them cautious about stepping up to run for office. Politics was viewed as an area in which it is very difficult to maintain one's values. Many of the women interviewed said they were happy to devote their time as activists to benefit the community but that if corruption wasn't a part of the political environment they would consider running.

Many women of color active in the community recognize that the decisions that affect the community are political decisions and that elected officials are the ones who vote on those key decisions. Therefore, their experience as activists often prepares them well for public office. But in order to be successful it is critical to realize that while their role may be different, their activism doesn't stop once elected. It is vital to continue to care about the community, know what is going on in the community, and understand what the community expects from them.

It is true that representing the community's interest effectively while holding elected office takes more time than what many women of color may have available because of the multiple demands related to work, family, advocacy, etc. This project demonstrates the underlying need for strategies to build family and community support to make public service easier.

Campaign Resources

In their interviews, the women emphasized three types of resources that they perceived as essential to a successful campaign: financial resources, information about and access to knowledge/training, and a team of people to work on the campaign (especially volunteers).

While some women explained that money was not the biggest obstacle, others did identify limited access to financial resources for the campaign as a barrier. Martina noted that several women identified a difference between having money themselves and feeling confident they could obtain funds due to their own knowledge and/or by having a solid campaign team.

Additionally, a number of women noted that it was important to have a team of politically experienced advisors. Networking with women who had knowledge and experience in political campaigning was another aspect that was viewed as a necessary ingredient before getting into a race.

Finally, many of the women cited the difference between people who encouraged them to run for office and those who would actually turn out to work on a campaign (campaign workers and volunteers). Several women expressed how important it was that they had the support of people who would actually be there in the campaign doing the work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations would go far to address the needs and concerns identified by these women leaders:

Increased Supports for Women of Color

Additional and improved information, training, and resources on how to run for office need to be made accessible to the actual communities in which these women live. Special attention should be paid to how to build a strong campaign team and provide the team with necessary training and tools to bring in more volunteers to run a successful campaign.

Involvement of Young Women of Color

Martina's research highlighted the importance of thinking about the "pipeline" in terms of young women, not just adults. The more younger women of color are exposed to politics, the more likely they will stay involved.

Network of Women to Support Each Other

The women interviewed in this study cited how tough the political environment is and how it's not conducive to creating a trusting and supportive environment, particularly for women of color. Therefore, mechanisms need to be developed to help connect women who want to run with other women who have had experience in the political arena. Such networks are needed to help nurture and sustain the pipeline.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Women of color leaders are in a unique position and possess relevant skills and knowledge to address specific needs and concerns in their communities. Their strong commitment to promoting social justice and addressing injustices in their communities is a major motivator for considering political office. Moreover, there is an opportunity for women to be role models in their families and for exposing their children to strong models of leadership and community engagement.

This project has great potential to influence the way training programs, campaign and political operatives and community activists understand political campaigning and public office holding for women of color. It provides an opportunity to further explore how to connect values-based leadership and community activism with political and electoral work.

IMPACT OF RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

Martina's reflection on how the fellowship experience impacted her emphasizes the validation and inspiration she drew from connecting with other women of color:

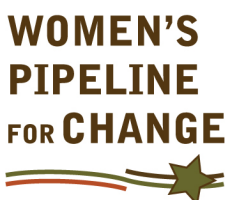
"The Research Fellowship process was a total learning experience. It provided me an opportunity to reflect on the work that I do in the community, my experience as an elected official, and the campaigns I have run. In addition, being able to interview women I didn't know that well allowed me to get to know other women who are similarly passionate and committed to their communities. This was both important and validating. The political arena can be alienating and lonely when you don't follow the political game. I hope to continue to engage more women in the political process as a result of this fellowship."

About the Pathways to Political Leadership for Women of Color Project

This project is the result of an innovative research partnership between UMass Boston's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy and the Women's Pipeline for Change. Five women of color active in Massachusetts politics became community researchers to identify barriers, opportunities, and resources of interest to women of color who navigate the pipeline toward elective and appointive office or other public leadership positions. In addition to this project brief, other resources produced by Research Fellow Martina Cruz may be found on the project website.

Visit www.umb.edu/pipeline

for Resources That Inspire, Inform, and Support Public Leadership for Women of Color



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