



Women
in Politics
in the
American
City

MIRYA R. HOLMAN

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Women in Politics in the American City

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the American City

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Urban Government, Democracy, and the Representation of Gender in the United States

Women in American Cities

When a woman leaves her natural sphere,
And without her sex's modesty or fear
Assays the part of man,
She, in her weak attempts to rule,
But makes herself a mark for ridicule,
A laughing-stock and sham.
Article of greatest use is to her then
Something worn distinctively by men—
A pair of pants will do.
Thus she will plainly demonstrate
That Nature made a great mistake
In sexing such a shrew.

—ANONYMOUS LETTER TO SUSANNA SALTER, FIRST
FEMALE U.S. MAYOR, ARGONIA, KANSAS, 1887¹

When Argonia, Kansas, elected Susanna Salter in 1887, she became the first woman to hold elected office in the United States. Selected largely as a result of electoral maneuvering by a group of men opposed to a slate of male candidates supported by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Mrs. Salter's election brought attention

to Argonia from reporters, supporters, detractors, and women's rights advocates.² Fast-forward more than 120 years, and women hold local elected offices throughout the United States. Yet despite the passage of time, the increase in the number of women in office, and extensive research on female leaders at the state and national levels, little is known about how female municipal leaders influence policy making in American cities.³

Is it important that women hold local office? Currently, 17 percent of mayors of large cities are women.⁴ Is this enough? How important is it that urban governments look like the cities and citizens they represent? This book is a careful analysis of how gender does and does not influence the political and policy behavior of mayors and council members. It draws on city council meeting minutes, surveys of and interviews with mayors and city council members, surveys of community members, and urban fiscal and employment data. Many theories of urban politics suggest that the gender of a mayor or city council member should be irrelevant, because electoral concerns, institutional limitations, informal relationships with business, and a drive for economic growth constrain the function of local representatives and make them interested in growth, regardless of gender. Indeed, despite identifying widespread gender effects at higher levels of office, such that women in office are more interested in funding social welfare programs and support feminist issues, the limited scholarship on gender and local politics largely concludes that women fail to similarly influence politics at the local level.⁵ I disagree. Although the local level *resists the incorporation of women's interests*, I found substantial evidence that the involvement of women in local politics *does* matter and has consequences for urban policy and the state of local democracy.

To demonstrate the importance of women's representation in local politics, the research presented here addresses a number of questions about female leaders in urban politics and the effects of gender on urban governance. First, why would gender matter at the local level? Can we identify a *cohesive set of urban women's issues*? From where does this array of issues emerge, and does it differ significantly from women's issues at other levels of government? Second, how does the gender of mayors and council members influence *policy preferences*, or how local representatives think about urban policies and politics? Do female leaders

and male leaders express similar levels of support for urban women's issues, such as those relating to children and welfare policies? Do men and women in local office express the same attitudes about representation? Third, does mayoral gender influence the *policy process*, or how cities engage in policy making? What does the election of women mean for the community's engagement in local politics? Fourth, do cities with female leaders make choices different from cities with male leaders about *policy outcomes* and which programs to fund? Finally, do voters make the correct decision for their city when they elect women? Does the presence of women in local office influence the quality of urban democracy and satisfaction with local government? What does the election of women to local office mean for the fiscal health of cities?

To answer these questions, I examine how gender influences (1) policy preferences, (2) policy processes, and (3) policy outcomes. The rest of this chapter presents an overview of three central bodies of knowledge: my conceptualization and operationalization of a set of women's urban issues, the general influence of gender on the behavior of leaders in decision-making bodies, and how urban policy making presents a unique and challenging frame for understanding the influence of women in politics.

Defining Urban Women's Issues

Our City does not ask us to die for her welfare; she asks us to live for her good, and so to act that her government may be pure, her officers honest, and every home within her boundaries be a place fit to grow the best kind of men and women to rule over her.

—MARY McDOWELL, "YOUNG CITIZEN'S CREED," 1898

Those policies that really help women—low-income housing, children's services, improving the schools, protecting women, that sort of thing—those are women's policies in my city. Those are what women come to me about.

—A FEMALE MAYOR, EXPLAINING HOW SHE WOULD
DEFINE WOMEN'S ISSUES OR POLICIES IN HER CITY

Women have a long history of activism in American urban politics, and extensive research documents women's early work on social

welfare, education, and public works in cities. However, we know much less about how women in modern urban politics behave or influence policies.⁶ Using a political development approach, I argue that women's extensive work in and interactions with particular areas of urban policy produce a set of *urban women's issues*, or areas under the purview of urban governance that reflect a history of women's political activism and disproportionately influence the lives of contemporary women in urban America.⁷ I include policies that address children, education, affordable housing, social welfare, and violence against women under this definition. I posit that women in modern urban politics, compared to their male counterparts, privilege this set of issues in policy making.

Urban women's issues are operationalized as including children, education, affordable housing, social welfare, and domestic violence for a variety of reasons, many of which relate to a gendered difference in the conceptualizations of social ills—in American political development and in modern times. First, 78 percent of female leaders I interviewed identified one or more of these as local women's issues (see Figure 1.1).⁸ Second, these issues have a strong history of women's political activism, including women's nascent political work in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States. Third, women receive the lion's share of services related to these issues. Fourth, women in the public and in political office engage in activism in these areas and value government intervention more than their male counterparts do. Fifth, these urban women's issues represent a subset of traditional women's issues—or “public concerns that impinge on the private (especially domestic) sphere of social life, and particularly those values associated with children and nurturance”⁹—but differ from women's issues traditionally handled by the state and federal governments, such as reproductive rights and pay equality.¹⁰ Finally, these issues continue to be associated with local decision making. While the engagement of state and federal governments in these areas has certainly increased in the last century, intervention largely occurs *within and through* local agencies and governments, not through agencies entirely run by a higher level of government. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development administers housing aid to local housing authorities; this significantly differs

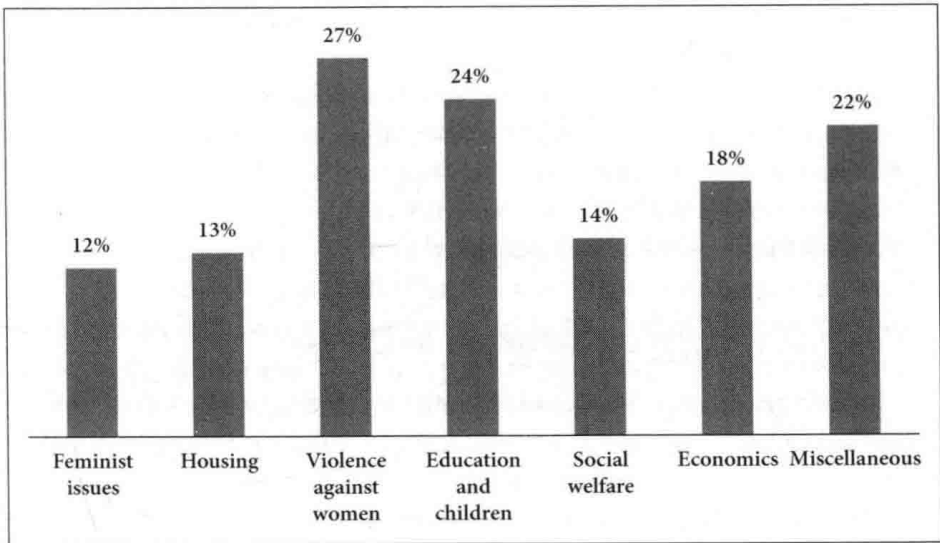


Figure 1.1 Definition of urban women's issues by female mayors and city council members. Leaders could name more than one issue, so percentages exceed 100 percent. Feminist issues include sexual discrimination and harassment, equal pay, abortion rights, and reproductive rights; housing includes affordable housing, housing costs, public housing, and renters' rights; violence against women includes rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence; education and children includes child care, summer school, foster care, PTA, school quality, and school violence; social welfare includes welfare, food stamps, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), homeless shelters, job training, and elderly care; economics includes jobs, job creation, wages, property development, and businesses moving to the city; miscellaneous includes cleaning up city hall, fighting corruption, cutting red tape, and eliminating bureaucracy. The data come from interviews with twenty-nine female leaders in the eight case-study cities described in Chapter 3.

from the Social Security Administration, which runs its own agencies in local areas.

I present the case for this array of urban women's issues in three discussions: a brief history of women's political development in activism in these areas in urban America, extant research on use and support of these policies by women and the representation of these policies by women in office, and policy making, particularly in these areas, in urban America. I make the case for a separate subset of *urban*

women's issues and for women in city politics to prefer, pursue, and produce policies within this arena.

For women in the United States (and around the world), gender serves as a central component of political identity. Before I proceed, it is necessary to define *gender*. For the purposes of the research here, I define *gender* as the social construction of biological sex, distinguished from sex, which is a biological marker.¹¹

Women's Historical Activism in Cities

For the first several decades of U.S. history, society relegated women to the private home and hearth while men acted for themselves and their female relatives in the public political and economic spheres.¹² Eventually, widespread action, particularly in cities and for the right to vote, led to a decline in the separation between the public and private spheres and women's initial engagement in formal political processes.¹³ Before women had formal access to politics, they engaged in a variety of informal activities, largely in local politics. Indeed, "voluntary, locally based moral and social reform efforts" represented the majority of women's early political activism.¹⁴

The concept of republican motherhood often justified political activism of women in the nineteenth century: women held responsibility for the future of the republic in raising their sons to be civic-minded citizens. From the American Revolution through the Progressive Era in the early 1900s, women began to insert themselves into political causes using "the canons of domesticity," in which women framed their public activism in terms of caring and nurturing.¹⁵ Others conceptualize early women's activism as cloaked in Domestic Feminism, in which women employ the ideal traits of a lady—including caring for the home—to justify work in the public sphere. The notion of a "universal womanhood" cultivated by these ideas was at its core essentially class based, constructed by the growing numbers of white middle-class women, often in an attempt to either control women of the lower classes and other races or create a false sense of a single homogenous group of women; by no means did all women participate in these actions.¹⁶ Despite the class- and race-based nature of this early

activism, republican motherhood and domestic feminism began to change social roles for wide swaths of American women.¹⁷

In many circumstances, women's participation in politics occurred through informal means or at the fringes of politics. Voluntary associations, lobbying organizations, and informal groups formed by women allowed political participation from the home without threatening traditional gender roles in society.¹⁸ The work of female urban activists focused on providing services to the poor, hungry, homeless, orphaned, and needy; holding men, including public officials, to high moral standards; and reforming public institutions.¹⁹ Women's work in these causes increased substantially through the women's club movement, first created for literary work but evolved in concern for municipal improvements ("an orgy of philanthropy") and transformed again with the Progressive movement in the early twentieth century.²⁰

The women's club movement was particularly important in women's local political activism. After the Civil War, well-to-do women formed self-improvement clubs for women denied college educations. Picking up in popularity in the late 1800s, women's clubs evolved to become loci of women's volunteerism and local civic activism. By the early 1900s, most large municipal areas in the United States saw women's club activities in a wide range of areas, such as education, children, housing, welfare, and the protection of women.²¹

Women's slowly growing political activism eventually attempted to expand the boundaries of the private sphere to frame women as social, public, or "municipal housekeepers,"²² in which a woman's city became her home, with specific responsibilities because "women's function, like charity, begins at home and then, like charity, goes everywhere."²³ As noted by Rheta Childe Dorr in her 1910 discussion of the women's club movement:

Woman's place is in the home. This is a platitude which no woman will ever dissent from, provided two words are dropped out of it. Woman's place is Home. Her task is homemaking. Her talents, as a rule, are mainly for homemaking. But Home is not contained within the four walls of an individual home. Home is the community. The city full of people is the Family. The