

The Female Advantage: Women Senators Pave the Way to Accord

By Whitney Ransome, Founding Director of The James Center at Garrison Forest School and Co-Founder of The National Coalition of Girls' Schools

Thanks to a handful of U.S. Senate women, a bipartisan plan of their making helped end the congressional log jam crippling the nation during the government shut-down and frightening governments around the world. Pragmatism, collaboration, inclusiveness and compromise exemplified their approach. In her seminal book The Female Advantage, author Sally Helgesen cited these qualities as key aspects of women's ways of leadership.

Spanning an ideological spectrum, the core Senate group knew how to work together as collaborators. They have a history of meeting regularly and working on smaller bills even in an extremely polarized Congress. For twenty years Senate women have met monthly for dinner. Their conversations range from concerns about the GDP to "Show me the grandkids." So when more high profile issues get stalled in the legislative process these same women know how to reach across the aisle and make things happen. Senator John McCain (R, Arizona) hailed their most recent collaboration. "Leadership, I must fully admit, was provided primarily by women in the Senate," he said.

It's no surprise that a number of these Senate leaders, including Maryland's Senator Barbara Mikulski, a participant in compromise efforts and the originator of the monthly dinners, have prior experiences in all-female settings. The opportunities vary from girls' scouts troops, girls' sports teams and camps, girls' schools and/or women's colleges. According to research conducted by Dr. Linda Sax at UCLA (March, 2009), single-sex education produces graduates with greater academic and political engagement and greater propensity to participate in student government. In other words, girls and women who've learned together recognize that they can and will find effective ways to lead.

"Girls – and the women they become – excel at employing relational leadership skills when they are most needed," notes Andrea Perry, Dean of Special Programs and Director of the James Center at Garrison Forest School. "Our students learn the value of all voices and work towards a common good. It's in the fabric of their experiences. They learn to lead with a sense of optimism and through empowering others. They learn that solutions rest within the group, that problems can be collectively solved. This model of leadership is evidenced by our alumnae every day in so many settings; it's a model that's increasingly important in a diverse and sometimes polarized world."

What is it that women leaders can offer as they manage conflict and intractable differences?

To name a few: the ability to listen to a diversity of opinions and give room for all sides to be heard; the tendency to inculcate inclusion rather than a hierarchy of authority and to seek common ground; a skill for finding solutions that serve many rather than a few; and a capacity for compromise as much as winner-take-all.

These same styles of leadership are at work with students at the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women, the first all-girls public school to open in the city in more than fifty years. They plan on making a difference based on learning together. The School's motto, "Changing Baltimore One Girl at a Time," hints at how they view the world beyond their years in school. They expect to be change agents for a greater good. It's part of the schools' DNA.

It's not that males lack similar leadership DNA. They have it when needed. But until the metaphors of Congress have less to do with battles, wars, and winners and more to do with collaboration and the better good, brinkmanship will prevail. Imagine what our nation's future might hold if we voted scores of women into seats of power. Just imagine.