

Western Massachusetts and Campaigns: Women of Color Running for Office

by Gladys Lebrón-Martínez, Research Fellow

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ABOUT GLADYS LEBRÓN-MARTÍNEZ

Gladys Lebrón-Martínez is currently serving as Holyoke’s City Council representative for Ward 1, after eight years of service to her community as an elected School Committee member. She is also an MCAS Career Counselor and Youth Center Manager for CareerPoint. She started her community organizing and advocacy work at “Nueva Esperanza”, a community service agency focused on low income and underserved communities in Holyoke. Councilwoman Lebrón-Martínez has also been an active leader on many community boards and organizations, such as the Holyoke Community Land Trust, the Holyoke Redevelopment Authority, and the Baypath College Advisory Board. Gladys has always focused on developing and supporting leadership among youth and women, and is committed to helping them understand the importance of becoming involved in the political process and to run for office.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

While attending a Women’s Pipeline for Change event in Boston during the summer of 2011, Gladys was inspired by the large number of women of color who came out to support other women of color in politics. This prompted her to document and analyze the resources that exist and are utilized by women of color, especially Latinas, running for elected office in Western Massachusetts.

The focus group represented the first time that most of the women met in person even though they live near and had heard of one another. Participants noted the lack of networking activities in their region. Further, even when they attended networking activities hosted by major organizations that work with women, there was limited or no presence of women of color. Several characterized the political culture in the region as not necessarily inclusive of women of color in terms of information, access, and opportunities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Gladys recruited nine Latinas from Western Massachusetts who ran for political office during the last four decades to participate in a focus group to share their experiences of running for elected office.

Focus group participants included:

- Nine Latinas of Puerto Rican background who had achieved elected office or had run for office in three different municipalities in Western Massachusetts
- Both city council and school committee candidates
- Women who had backgrounds in social services, education, or social issues
- Five who were elected, one who was appointed to fill a vacancy, and three who didn’t win their race
- Two women who first ran for office in 2011, four women who ran in the 2000s, two who sought office in the 1990s and one in the 1980s

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

The Importance of Networks and Mentors

Successful campaigns utilized existing resources and also capitalized on the candidate’s own networks and knowledge of their communities to build community and financial support (see Table 1). Traditional resources such as trainings and consultants were not as significant as the networks and mentors utilized.

Table 1. Resources Available in Western Massachusetts for Women of Color Running Campaigns (N=9)

| Expected/Traditional Resources | # Focus Group Participants* | Resources Specific to Western Massachusetts or Candidate | # Focus Group Participants* |
|--|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Training programs | 2 | Well-known community leader who helped other candidates’ campaigns | 3 |
| Political consultants or advisors | 2 | Family member with elective office experience | 1 |
| Endorsements (carrying financial, strategy, or field campaign support) | 1 | Candidate’s own network (family, friends, community) | 9 |
| Encouragement and support by a sitting elected official | 1 | Family name recognition | 1 |
| Support from the local party structure | 1 | Momentum created by a number of Latinas running in neighboring towns | 1 |

*Number of focus group participants who used resources or to whom they were available.

“A Lonely Journey”

The findings indicate that although traditional campaign resources such as training programs and consultants exist, none were tailored for or interconnected enough to support the experiences of the women who participated in the focus group.

Many women discussed how lonely the journey was for them. In addition, most ran for office because they believed in making a difference around an issue or wanted to represent their community. Many had limited campaign experience and were not familiar with how intense the campaign experience or holding political office could be.

The women indicated that racism and sexism were barriers. Receiving advice to change their ethnic names and being discouraged by men are just two examples of how this was manifested and experienced.

Also, the lack of financial, emotional, and community support were major barriers during their campaigns. A number of women indicated that the kind of support that would have been more significant to them is more personal. For instance, trainings cannot provide the type of moral or emotional support that is so important both in political campaigns and in serving in local office. They thought that having emotional support would make it a little easier to face the challenges of the campaign or elected office.

The Political Game

Additionally, the pressure of the ‘political game’ and the feeling of ‘owing’ people made some women question whether they were compromising their values and whether politics was really for them. Women also noted disappointment at how slowly government processes operated and that change did not come more quickly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings provide the basis for recommendations related to existing training programs and strategies for political networking. They also demonstrate the need for the creation of specific programs or strategies focused on Western Massachusetts.

- **Network for Women of Color** - There is a need to develop a strong network for women of color in office and running for office in Western Massachusetts. This network could provide mutual support and advice and enable joint political strategizing and fundraising.
- **Expectations** - When preparing women of color to run, training programs and campaign advisors should go deeper into the expectations of campaigning and elective office and the nature of how city government works, especially for those with a social service or community organizing background.
- **Leadership Pipelines** - A strategy should be developed to build leadership pipelines with young women of color in Western Massachusetts who understand the nature of political campaigns in communities of color. This is as important as nurturing women of color to pursue office as there needs to be knowledgeable and experienced women of color to run and manage political campaigns.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Gladys’ study has inspired her to continue her activities to support and increase the pipeline of women of color in Western Massachusetts based on the following priorities:

- Mentoring young women
- Discussing the realities of running for office and campaigning
- Bringing women of color together
- Responding to discouraging and disparaging actions and remarks in the region that prevent women of color from moving up the pipeline

IMPACT OF RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

The research fellowship experience allowed Gladys to recognize the skills, attitudes, and experiences that have helped her become a political leader, such as believing in herself, being bold, asking tough questions, and finding creative ways to gain access and lift up her voice to benefit the community. In addition, the ability to find support from other fellows became very important to her during and after the fellowship year. As a result, Gladys hopes her research can begin to change the conditions for more women of color to have successful careers in public leadership in Western Massachusetts.

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 Gladys Lebrón-Martínez 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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