mayors
innovation
project

UNDER PRESSURE

How the Unique Challenges Faced by Women Mayors Undermine Democratic Governance.

QUINCY MIDTHUN & KATYA SPEAR

SEPTEMBER 2025

Acknowledgments

Our team is eternally grateful to the more than 300 mayors who provided data to make this report possible, with special thanks to women mayors interviewed for contributing their time, experiences, and ideas.

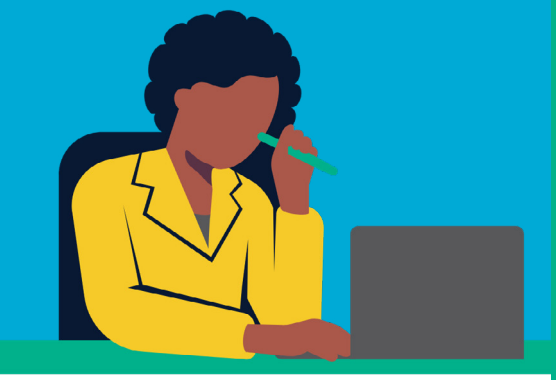
Our special thanks to former mayors Betsy Hodges (Minneapolis, MN) and Chasity Wells-Armstrong (Kankakee, IL) for their contributions to creating, developing, and deploying our survey and interview tools, and for their contributions to this report.

Funding for this project was provided by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (BLFF). We are especially grateful to BLFF's Amanda Hunter for engaging with our Women Mayors Network over the years and believing in this work.

We are grateful to the Survey Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which administered our survey and provided transcription for the interviews, along with coding and analysis of data. Our data is clearer and cleaner thanks to the efforts of Manisha Jain, Griffin Bur, and Chris McCahill Ph.D. We are grateful to Leslie Vasquez for the design and layout of this report. Leslie's expertise was instrumental in making the findings accessible and visually compelling.

Sarah "Frankie" Frank, Ph.D. and her team at the Institute for Gender Research in Law & Litigation at UW–Madison provided invaluable background research and context helpful in researching and contextualizing this topic and drafting our survey instruments.

Finally, this work is made possible thanks to a number of brilliant and bold organizations working in this space, including the BLFF, RepresentWomen, and the Center for American Women in Politics. Thank you for your continued support and collaboration, and for the work that you do to create and publish actionable data on women in politics and the power of political representation.



WOMEN MAYORS
NETWORK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

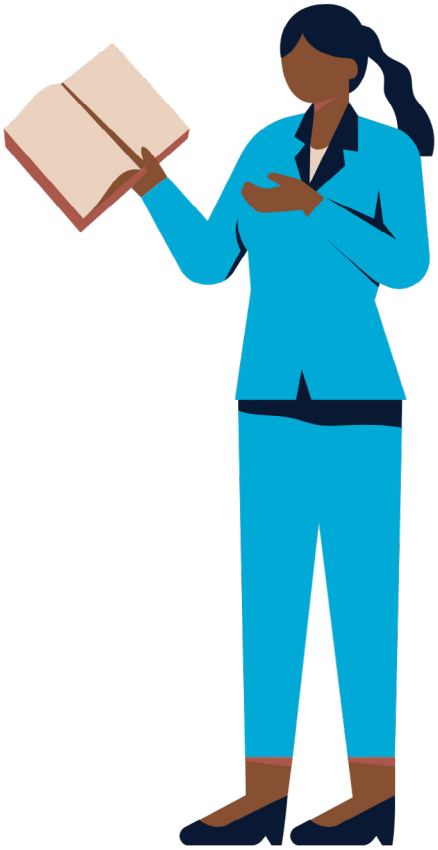
This report, produced by the Mayors Innovation Project's Women Mayors Network, explores the unique challenges faced by women mayors across the United States through a national survey and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that gender is a statistically significant factor in shaping the experiences of mayors, particularly in areas such as threats and harassment, scrutiny of competence, and structural barriers to authority. Women mayors reported more frequent and severe harassment than their male counterparts, both while campaigning and in office. They also faced disproportionate criticism related to their appearance, emotional state, and family responsibilities, often navigating a "double bind"—at times being perceived as too weak and at other times too strong. These experiences impact the personal well-being of women mayors and require them to devote extra time and energy refocusing attention to their work. They are both a symptom and a result of systemic barriers that dissuade women from seeking and staying in office, or pursuing higher office, which prevents communities from benefiting from the full range of capable leadership and weakens our democracy.

Despite these challenges, the report highlights the resilience and determination of women in mayoral roles and the solutions to address the barriers that women face. Many women mayors continue to serve their communities with distinction, often relying on peer support networks and professional development opportunities. However, resilience alone is not a sustainable solution. Systemic changes—including equitable pay, improved safety measures, supportive staffing, and inclusive policies—are needed to reduce barriers and foster a more representative and effective local government. By addressing these issues, cities can better support women in leadership and strengthen democratic governance at the local level.

INTRODUCTION

The Mayors Innovation Project is a national, nonpartisan peer learning network for US mayors that seeks to advance equity, sustainability, and democracy through local policymaking. In cities across the country, mayors are leading on the nation's most critical issues—from climate to homelessness to economic development—while simultaneously tackling the day-to-day issues—from potholes to public meetings. Meanwhile, divisiveness in public work is as high as it has ever been, and both physical and psychological threats to city leaders are becoming increasingly more commonplace.[1] Mayors are often the closest to their constituents and most isolated from their peers, and the role of mayor is unique in its scope and breadth of work.

As a network, we focus primarily on local policy levers to support thriving communities. But because policymakers are people, too, over our 20 years as an organization we have sought to support mayors as both policymakers and as human beings. Nearly all mayors face common challenges to being effective leaders, but many new leaders and leaders from a diverse array of communities and identities that have historically been underrepresented in elected office—including women, people of color, low-income people, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people—face unique structural barriers that make it harder to attain, retain, and succeed in the role. This not only creates unnecessary barriers for women, but undermines our democracy, denying constituents access to a full range and breadth of qualified leaders. Because of this, we have created unique programming like our New Mayors Cohort and Women Mayors Network, designed to research, catalogue, and confront barriers that new mayors, women mayors, and mayors of color face.



METHODS

Despite mayors being important role-players in local and national democracy, there is simply not good data about the demographics of mayors across the country, with most national data tracking only the demographic information of executive office holders in cities with populations of at least 30,000. Nor is there much data that analyzes the unique barriers and opportunities that women mayors and mayors of color face. Over years of speaking with mayors of all types, races, genders, and geographies, we had a lot of anecdotal information that led us to this work. This research project is an effort to better understand and document the challenges US mayors face, and in particular the challenges that are unique to women mayors.

1. Princeton University, "*Threats and Harassment Dataset*," Bridging Divides Initiative, accessed September 10, 2025, **https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/research/understanding-threats-and-harassment-against-local-officials/dataset**.

Our research had two key components:

- A national survey distributed to sitting mayors (all genders) in June 2024. Our outreach list combined two sources: our own database, where we track to the best of our ability all mayors in the United States; and a paid service, PowerAlmanac, which also tracks positions in local governments and updates their records every 90 days. We did this to ensure the most current and accurate sample available at the time we administered the survey. In total, we sent the survey to 2,691 unique email addresses, representing approximately 2,300 mayors. Mayors took the survey via a link sent to their email, resulting in data from ~235 US mayors. As mentioned, there is little national demographic data about mayors available, but representation amongst our respondents aligns well with what is available nationally:[2]
    - Respondents were 60% men.
    - Sixty five percent of respondents were in mayor-council form of government.
    - Respondents were about 60% full-time (vs part-time) mayors.
    - City size of respondents include:
        - 43% of respondents in cities with populations under 30,000
        - 42% of respondents in cities between 30,000 - 100,000
        - 13% of respondents in cities between 100,000 - 250,000
        - 2% of respondents in cities over 250,000
- A series of focus group interviews of women mayors conducted in the spring and summer of 2024. Each group consisted of between two and six women mayors, resulting in in-depth interviews with ~50 women mayors.
    - All participants were women mayors.
    - About 60% of participants were in council-manager forms of government.

Both our survey instrument and our interview protocol were structured to ask mayors to share their experiences while campaigning for the office of mayor separately from their experiences once elected mayor. You will see this reflected throughout the report.

While the demographics of our respondents align with nationally available data, it is important to recognize that our samples, for both the survey and the interviews, are not random. The mayors in our sample were self-selected, meaning participants may have been motivated to complete the survey based on their own values and preferences. Because our respondents self-selected, the sample has limited generalizability to the overall population of mayors. It is our hope that this report will catalyze conversations and additional research about the experiences of mayors and the solutions and resources needed to support them.

2. Center for American Women and Politics, "*Women Mayors in U.S. Cities 2024*," Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University–New Brunswick, accessed September 10, 2025, **https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/local/women-mayors-us-cities-2024**.

GENDER WAS FOUND TO BE A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN KEY ASPECTS OF A MAYOR'S EXPERIENCE

Our survey and interview results validated what we have heard anecdotally from women mayors over the last 20 years: that while both women and men mayors reported experiencing threats and harassment, women mayors reported more frequent, more severe harassment both on the campaign trail and in office.

Overall, women respondents rated their experiences campaigning and governing more negatively than men. When asked to think about their overall experience campaigning for mayor, 30% of women said their experience was a little, somewhat, or very negative, compared to 17% of men. Fourteen percent of women said their overall experience as mayor was a little, somewhat, or very negative, compared to 5% of men. These differences, along with the differences between men and women across other variables in our survey such as experiencing criticism of physical appearance and experiencing sexual harassment, were found to be statistically significant.[3] Our research sought to define what exactly a "negative" experience meant and what specific barriers women mayors encountered. Our small group interviews helped to illuminate and provide context for the data captured in the survey. Interviews revealed that women mayors faced both persistent systemic barriers and individual biases that at the very least distracted from their mayoral work and at their most severe level threatened the physical safety of mayors and their families.

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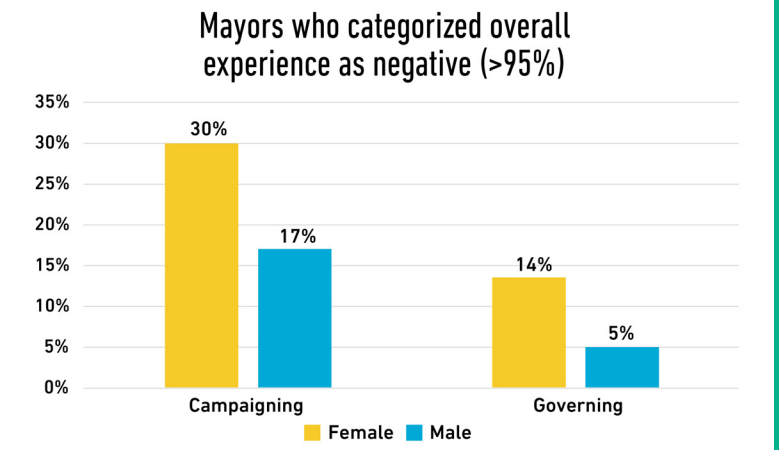
3. A result is "statistically significant" if it is unlikely to have arisen just by chance. For this report, we tested the difference between two means, i.e. the proportion of all female mayors experiencing some situation and the proportion of all male mayors experiencing that same situation. When we say that something is statistically significant in this report, we mean that we can say with at least 95% certainty that these results are not due to chance or randomness. You will see levels of confidence reflected in the titles of the charts. Again, it is important to note that our sample was not a random sample and that participants were self-selected.

FIG. 1



THREATS AND HARASSMENT

Women mayors reported experiencing more harassment than men, both as candidates and on the job. Our survey showed that gender is a significant factor that impacts whether mayors are threatened or harassed, whether they experience criticism of their physical appearance, and whether sexually inappropriate comments are directed at them on the campaign trail.

Survey data indicated that 84% of women mayors reported experiencing harassment on the campaign trail compared to 64% of men. When disaggregated by frequency of harassment on the campaign trail, 32% of women reported experiencing harassment at least three times per month compared to 21% of men. Women reported receiving threatening letters and phone calls to their homes, online and in-person name calling, and being physically intimidated while canvassing. One woman mayor explained, "I had campaigned and had a man, a larger man . . . try to be very physically intimidating at the door . . . . He actually stepped out of his door . . . and got in my space." Another shared, "[I was] physically intimidated at the doors all the time, people stepping out, people taking literature and then ripping it up in [my] face and throwing it at [me], that sort of stuff."

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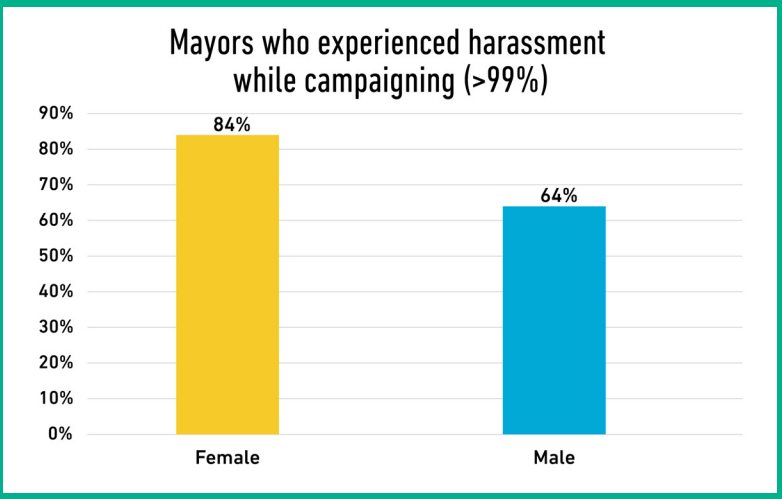
FIG. 2



Women mayors of color in particular shared harrowing experiences they faced while canvassing. One mayor shared that while canvassing with her young child, she was told by an older white man that he "didn't mean to be racist, but it's off-putting for two [people of color] to knock on a white person's door." Another shared that her daughter was called racial slurs while canvassing.

Our survey data showed that gender has a statistically significant impact on whether mayors in office are harassed three or more times per month, with 25% of women mayors experiencing harassment three or more times per month compared to 10% of men. In interviews, women reported being yelled at in public meetings; receiving threatening emails, letters, and calls at their home and office; receiving threatening comments on social media; and having their property damaged. At least three women mayors we spoke with shared that they had stalkers whose actions were so severe that they had to get restraining orders. One mayor reported frequently receiving emails that said, "You should leave the city. You and your family don't belong here. You should kill yourself. You're terrible." Another shared, "I had someone vandalize my house. They wrote [a threat] on our garage."

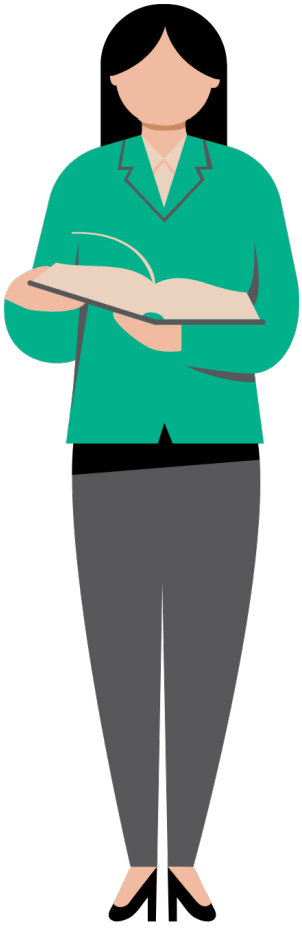
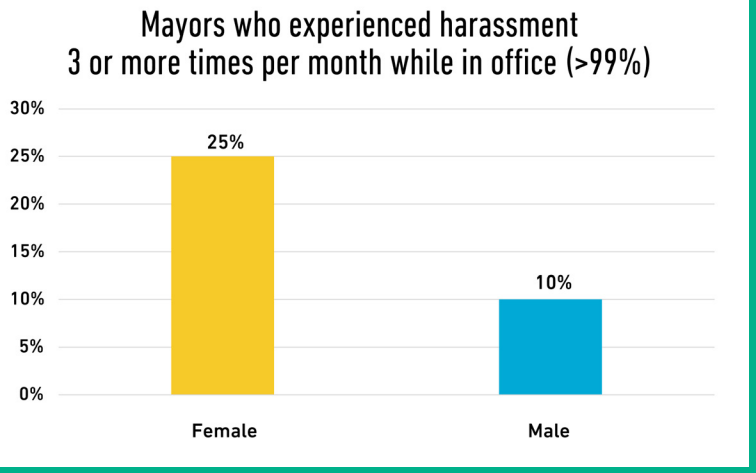
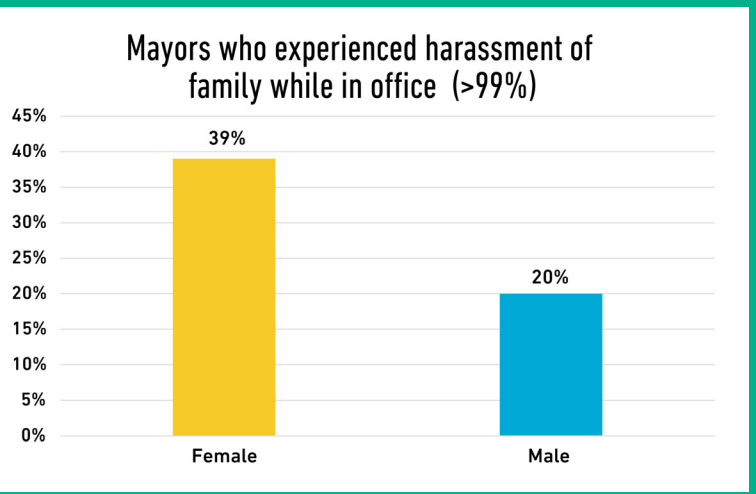


FIG. 3



Gender was also found to have a statistically significant impact on whether mayors' families faced harassment or threats. Nearly twice (39%) as many women reported threats and harassment to their family compared to men (20%). In interviews, one mayor shared that her adult child received death threats, another shared that people threatened her spouse's job, another reported that she had to get rid of her home phone because the threatening voicemails left on it upset her child, and one mayor even shared that people threatened her dog. One mayor shared, "[People threatened] to kill my husband . . . [they said] there's too many rats in [my city], so [we'll] give the rats the poison and . . . poison your [children]."

FIG. 4



Threats and harassment came at a significant personal cost to women mayors, causing them to be hyper aware of potential safety risks and taking extra precautions to protect themselves and their families. One mayor shared, "I have regular conversations . . . of, if somebody approaches [my child] . . . what do you do? And so we go through how, as [a toddler, they] keep safe." Another shared, "I have a [grandchild] . . . and my son-in-law went to daycare to pick [them] up one day. And they said somebody came and asked which [child] was the Mayor's grandchild. So they had to add extra security to [the school]." Another shared, "[I've] spent half of my $10,000 Mayor salary on putting security cameras at my home and office."

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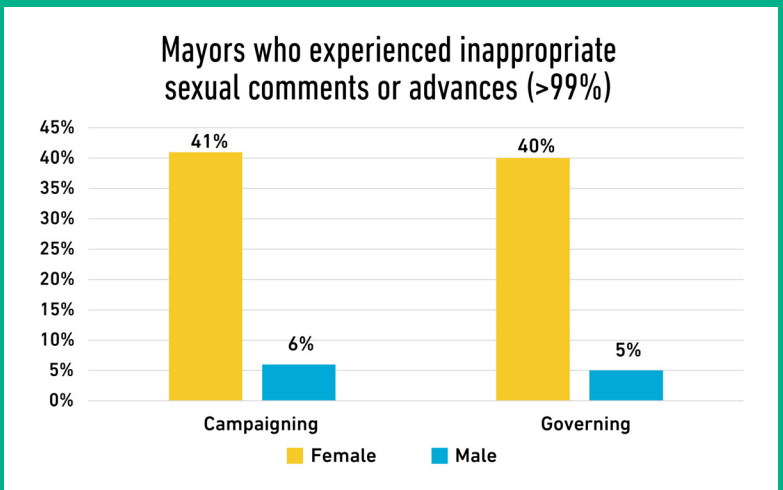
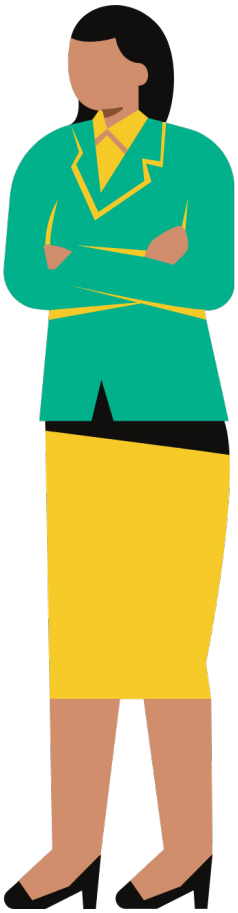
SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In our sample, gender was also shown to have a statistically significant impact on whether mayors experience sexual harassment. **Women reported experiencing sexual harassment significantly more than their male peers both on the campaign trail and in office, the greatest disparity in our survey by far.** While campaigning, 41% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment, compared to 6% of men. While governing, 40% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment compared to 5% of men. One woman mayor shared, "I had a guy who sent me an email . . . basically inferring that he'd like to [commit sexual violence against] me and have my [spouse] watch . . . it was a series of like 40 emails . . . filled with a lot of sexual violence."

FIG. 5



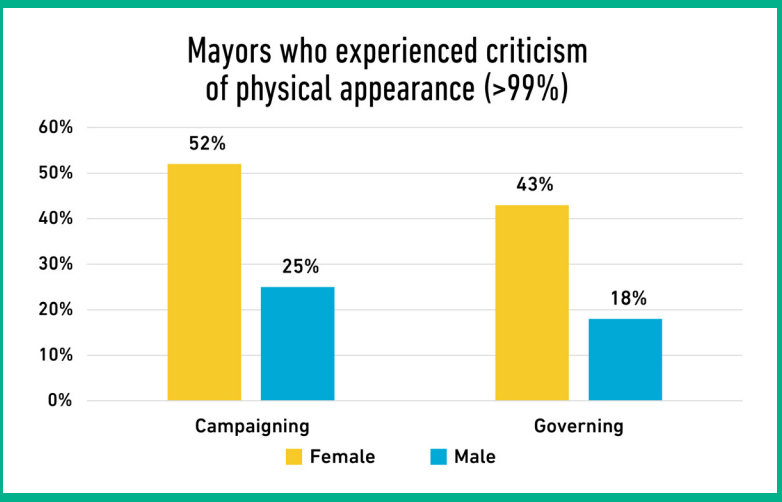


PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

In survey results, gender was found to have a statistically significant impact on whether mayors experienced criticism of their physical appearance both on the campaign trail and in office. Women reported experiencing such criticism on the campaign trail and in office at over double the rate as men, with 52% of women reporting experiencing criticism while campaigning compared to 25% of men. As mayor, 43% of women reported experiencing criticism of their appearance compared to 18% of men. In interviews, one woman shared that she could instantly relate to fellow women mayors she met because of the messages they receive, which frequently include insults such as "fat, ugly, and bitch."

> Women explained that they were in a double bind... criticized for being too ugly while also criticized for being too attractive.

FIG. 6



Women explained that they were in a double bind, sometimes criticized for being too ugly while at other times being criticized for being too attractive. One mayor explained, "Sometimes it's, you've got a really hot mayor . . . And sometimes it's old men saying, your beauty mark should probably be removed." One mayor shared, "I was told . . . I was off putting because I was attractive, and I needed to be less attractive." Another shared, "I'm [middle-aged]. But I . . . look a lot younger than anybody who had held office before. And so I still get called kiddo . . . it's kind of condescending . . . a little bit of ageism, and definitely due to being a woman."

These criticisms and comments, while not necessarily threatening, come at a personal cost to women mayors who have to spend extra time and effort to refocus conversations on city business and work. Women mayors expressed frustration with the attention given to their appearance, whether negative or positive, because it came at the expense of attention to their work. "[It was] like somehow, the color of my hair . . . was connected to my ability to govern and lead," one woman mayor lamented.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL STATE

Though not statistically significant at the level of 95%, data from our survey showed that gender impacted whether mayors face criticism of their mental or emotional state. As mayor, 31% of women mayors experienced criticism of their mental or emotional state compared to 20% of men. One mayor shared that she was criticized as weak because she was wary of attending events where people openly carried firearms, "[People will say] look how weak she is [for not wanting to go]. She can't handle [it]. I knew that I had to [attend] because to not do it would look like I'm weak." Others shared that they were portrayed as emotional, angry, and incompetent. "The main criticism of me during my campaign in the media was this completely undocumented and unfounded allegation that I was really difficult to work with, insinuating that I was an angry person," one woman mayor shared.

This criticism is especially directed at women mayors of color—40% of women mayors of color reported experiencing criticism of their mental or emotional state compared to 27% of white women mayors. Women mayors of color shared that they were hyper aware that their actions and words could be misconstrued as "angry." One woman mayor of color explained, "If you're a [woman of color], you're aware of that [sterotype]. You know . . . from the jump, you're going to be called aggressive. And so, you're already kind of [preparing] yourself." Another said, "It's always been important for me to not appear to be the angry [woman of color]."

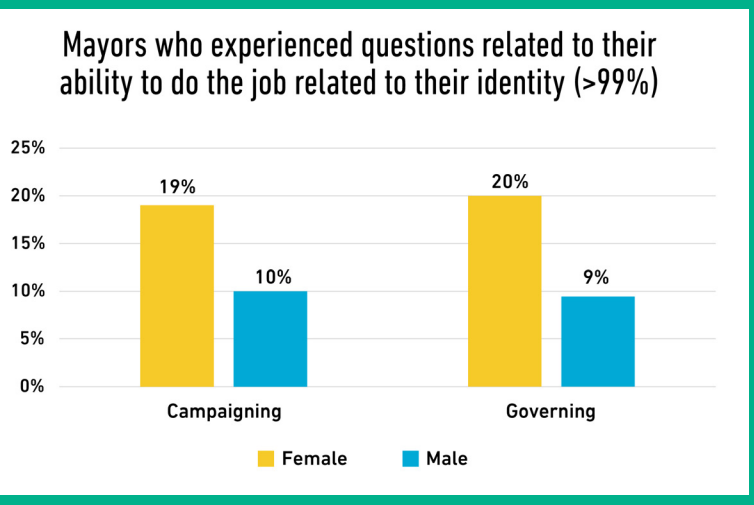
ABILITY TO MANAGE THE JOB

Our sample showed that gender was statistically significant in whether or not mayors were faced with questions about their ability to do the job related to their identity both on the campaign trail and while governing. While campaigning, 19% of women experienced questions about their ability to do the job related to their identity compared to 10% of men.

One woman mayor of color explained, "If you're a [woman of color], you're aware of that. You know... from the jump, you're going to be called aggressive. And so, you're already kind of centering yourself."

In interviews, women mayors with children frequently reported being asked questions to the effect of, "Who will care for your children?" and "How will you manage?" In fact, eight of the women mayors we interviewed—nearly 18%—reported questions about their ability to simultaneously raise children and govern. Women mayors were also questioned about their education and leadership experience, and again they faced a double bind: sometimes women mayors were criticized for being underqualified and at other times overqualified. One woman mayor shared that despite being on council for several years before she ran for mayor, she was criticized for not having enough experience. One woman shared, "I had [an advanced degree and experience in local government, yet] . . . my experience was pooh-poohed in certain circles, like is she really ready to lead the city?" Another mayor explained that she was criticized for being overqualified and having too much education, "The mainstream media [said] I was overqualified. I had too many degrees . . . [they insinuated] I thought I was better than everybody in [my city]."

FIG. 7



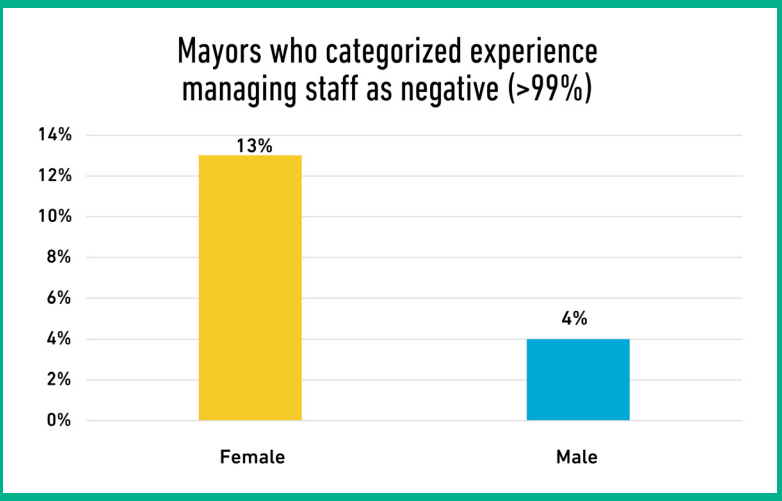
In our survey, 20% of women mayors reported experiencing questions about their ability to do the job related to their identity while governing compared to just 9% of men, implying that their gender, marital status, or family composition somehow made them unfit to serve. Several women mayors described instances where they were presumed to be a mayoral assistant, an experience that many women in positions of leadership are familiar with. "I went to the state capitol [for an event], they have reserved seats [for] Mayor, . . . and I'm looking for the right seat. And somebody says, oh, are you with the Office of the Mayor? [I said] Yeah. Sure am," one woman mayor said. Another shared that it was only when male colleagues shared information that her council would listen: "They didn't believe me when I told them something. But if my male police chief or some other male figure in the administration told them, then they were like, oh, okay." Another shared that she was questioned in ways that her male predecessor was not, "I worked for the [former male mayor] for years, so I know the mechanics of city government . . . all of a sudden, I had [senior city staff] like almost double checking what it is that I'm doing . . . I called them out on it, and I said you guys never did this with him."

In addition to having their ability to manage the job scrutinized, women's reasons for wanting the job were often demeaned. Again our data showed that women experienced a "double bind": from being perceived as "too weak" or "too aggressive;" "too ambitious" or "lacking vision;" "confident" or "arrogant;" being perceived as a "good mother" or a "dedicated professional." One woman mayor we interviewed shared that a recurring theme during her time in office was, "Just this running narrative of, she's only running for Mayor because she wants to be something else. Like she wants to advance, to run for something else in the future. And she's only doing this because she wants to be in, you know, the administration. She wants to move to Washington. And the point is that, first of all, so what if I did have ambition, right? **But men are allowed to have ambition, and we are not.**"

MANAGEMENT DUTIES AND WEAPONIZED INCOMPETENCE

Our sample showed that gender has a statistically significant impact on a mayor's experience in managing city staff, working with city council, and whether staff did their jobs. Thirteen percent of women mayor survey respondents categorized their experience managing staff as negative compared to 4% of men, and 9% of women mayors reported experiencing refusal of city staff or subordinates to perform the basic duties of their job compared to 6% of men. Similarly, 24% of women said that their experience working with city council was either a little negative, somewhat negative, or very negative compared to 13% of men.

FIG. 8



In interviews, women mayors shared countless stories of city staff or council being disrespectful to them, but this went far beyond insults. Experiences shared included staff and council flat out refusing to do their jobs, purposely completing tasks incorrectly, withholding information, or delaying work so that opportunities were lost. Many described forms of weaponized incompetence, a manipulative technique where people strategically pretend to be incompetent at a task to avoid doing it or to shift the burden to another person.

SOME EXAMPLES THAT HIGHLIGHT WOMEN MAYORS' EXPERIENCE WITH WEAPONIZED INCOMPETENCE INCLUDE:

"There were certain things that [were] happening in [my city], and I find out on the Internet. I find out after it happened. And I would explain to them that it's an embarrassment as mayor. I represent this city."

"[A city staffer] would not register me for certain things and come up with all types of excuses for why it didn't happen or go through. Everyone else would be registered. Or I would get registered for whatever it may be, but now it's late. Now I don't get the [hotel] room [or scholarship] that I may have wanted or maybe even needed."

"When I [was elected], I [asked], I need to have access to the Outlook calendar. And they told me no . . . . They didn't share information with me . . . . No one gave me a real legal opinion why. And so . . . I was very vocal, [I would] politely ask . . . . But [still,] I don't have access yet to anything like that."

"Everything I would bring before [the council], they would delay it, delay it, and ask me for all these supporting documents. And so I reminded them, . . . I served on council. These double standards must stop. You didn't ask for all these supporting documents from the prior [male] mayor. Even when I showed them the supporting documents, they wanted supporting documents to support those documents."

"I had asked for them to give me a [section] on the website just so my constituents could reach me. They refused to do that. So I had asked if I could help control the social media page because I'm the one that's going to these events, putting things out. So they enacted a social media policy to make sure that I couldn't have control over social media. So I created my own."

Again, women mayors found themselves in a double bind—at times accused of being too incompetent or weak to lead their staff and/or council and at other times accused of being too controlling or too strong. One woman mayor summed it up, "It's like this contradiction that I'm somehow incompetent and ineffective, and I'm ruining the city in all these various ways . . . . And at the same time, I'm all powerful and that everything that happens is my fault, and I'm controlling the entire City Council. They are my minions. They are my puppets."

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO AUTHORITY

In our sample, gender was found to have a statistically significant impact on whether mayors experience formal attempts to change or limit their authority from what has historically been the role of the mayor, for example by amending the City Charter or Code. Nineteen percent of women mayors who answered our survey reported experiencing attempts to limit their authority compared to 16% of men.

Women mayors found themselves in a double bind–at times accused of being too incompetent or weak to lead their staff and/or council and at other times accused of being too controlling or too strong.

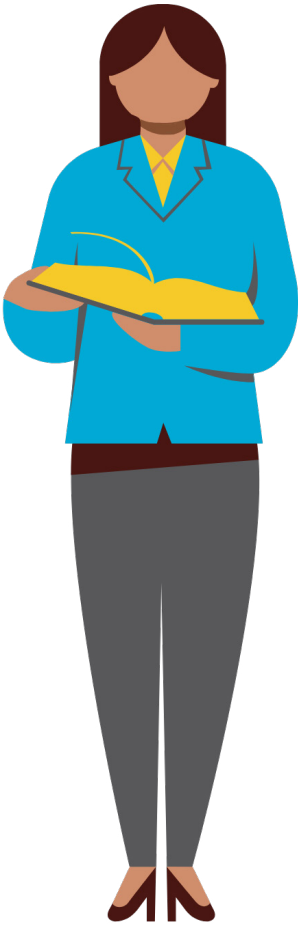
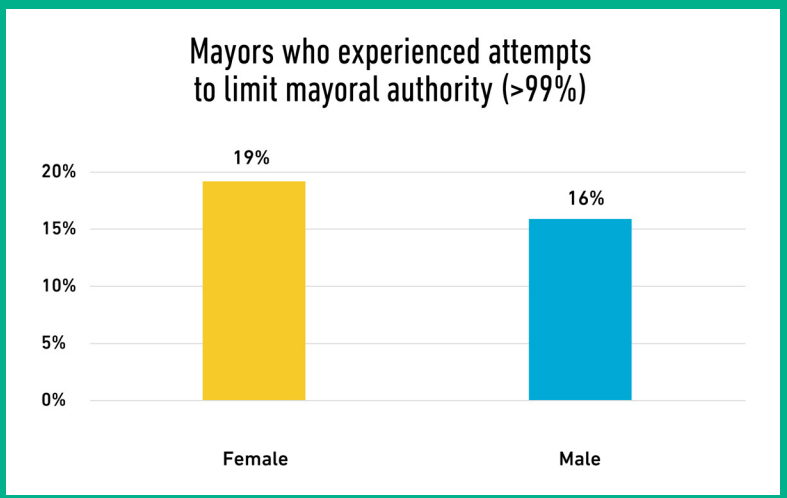


FIG. 9



SOME EXAMPLES OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL CHALLENGES TO AUTHORITY THAT WOMEN MAYORS SHARED IN INTERVIEWS INCLUDE:

"Literally while I was [in the hospital] . . . one of the councilors put forward a resolution to stop me from being able to do proclamations."

"I used to say, meeting adjourned. Now I have to ask [the council] for a motion to adjourn the meeting . . . they have changed quite a few things and taken the power away from the mayor as much as they could."

"[The council] tried to introduce resolutions that say, you can't hire or fire people without our approval. And then legal will come back and say, that's actually illegal. You can't limit her actions in that way."

"As mayor, I have the responsibility of setting the agenda. I get to decide what goes on the agenda, what doesn't go on the agenda. And so I would make those decisions, and they would tell me I didn't have the right to make those decisions. And it's like, yes, I do. It says right here [in the charter] that I get to decide what goes on the agenda. And, no, you don't get to go around me and go to staff and tell them to put something on the agenda without talking to me first."

"The council tried to take away a bunch of my ability to do emergency powers because they weren't happy with what I was doing in the pandemic and, I mean, I think mostly because they felt scared."

"When [I] got elected, it was me and [three other women of color] on the council, which was a first too for them. They were talking about, we have a five-person [council] . . . . And they were like, oh, we're going to expand the council from five to seven. And I was like, [absolutely not]."

CHALLENGES TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Additionally, gender was found to have a statistically significant influence on whether mayors experience **scrutiny of or restrictions to their travel budget or schedule**. Oftentimes travel expenses are for professional development opportunities or conferences where mayors engage with peers and policy experts in an effort to make connections that will benefit their city. As mayor, 11% of women compared to 6% of men reported experiencing attempts by council or staff to scrutinize or limit their travel budget or schedule. In interviews, women mayors described that their travel was often viewed as frivolous or wasteful. **Many opted to pay travel costs out of their own pocket to avoid potential conflict with city staff, council, the media, or constituents.**

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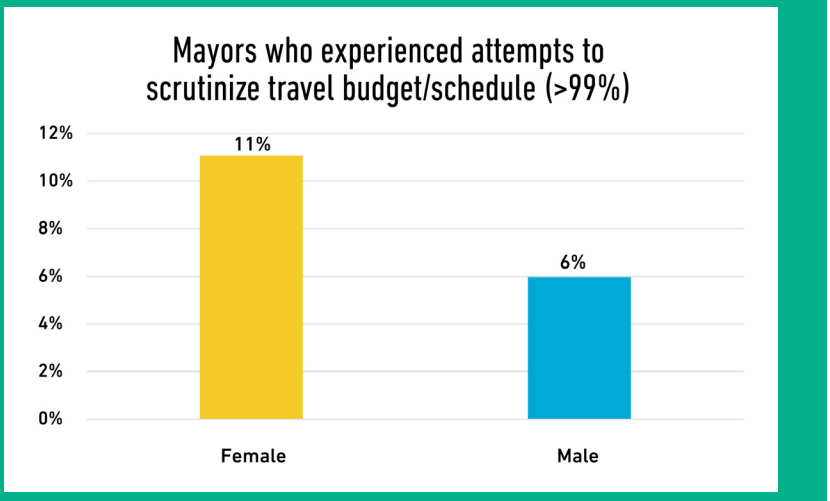
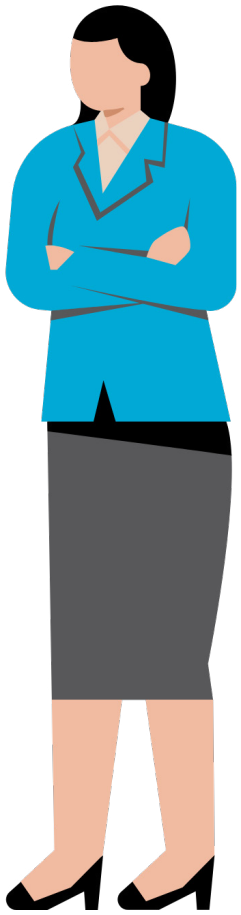
FIG. 10





SPEAKING TO CHALLENGES TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OR TRAVEL SUPPORT, WOMEN MAYORS SHARED:

"I have always paid for my own travel. The City will sometimes cover the cost of the registration . . . from what I understand from other female mayors, that's kind of a regular thing, and it's not a regular thing for mayors that are male . . . I really believe continuing education and conferences are really good for the mayor and council. I would, at this point, approve that kind of expenditure. But I just, it's not worth it. I've been hassled by the media where they've taken all the local elected officials and run through what they've spent on travel or conferences. And it's always nice that I don't have to deal with it. So, when you say, do you spend your entire salary and more, the lost opportunity, absolutely, there's a lost opportunity there."

"The [previous] mayor had a little larger travel [and] education budget. I became Mayor. The next budget cycle, they say, she doesn't need that much . . . . But the demands on me as a [female mayor of color] in my community is 20 times as big as the previous mayor . . . my secretary tells me [more people] want to see you, because I look like them."

"It's just like the optics of spending money on me in any way, shape, or form, I feel like is not a thing I can do. Like we are not going to renovate our office suite because it would be me spending money on me. I won't take a detail because it would be me spending money on me. I'm super careful about travel, and I pay for 80% to 90% of my own . . . [but] my predecessor had a huge travel budget, which he spent liberally."

"I have to fight for professional development money for the rest of my staff, never mind me. [People think I] don't need it."

The data and stories above illustrate how a combination of structural barriers and personal biases—and the conditions they create—construct roadblocks that make it more challenging for women to run for and succeed in office. While campaigning for office, these roadblocks include irrelevant criticisms of their previous experience, education, family composition, physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and ability to manage the job in addition to threats to the physical safety of themselves, their family, and their property. Once in office, roadblocks include people and systems that intentionally or unintentionally undermine their authority or attempt to curtail their power on top of increased visibility and inadequate resources to protect their privacy and safety. This creates an environment in which women leaders must spend additional time, money (often from their own pockets), and attention addressing issues across work and home life, and detract from their ability to do and succeed at their job. It is worth pointing out that **these roadblocks that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups may not be flaws in the system, but rather features of it, designed to uphold the status quo.**

Given these barriers and the lack of resources available to address them, it is clear why so many women do not feel as though running for office is a choice that they have, let alone want to make. Reducing these barriers, and addressing the implicit biases that create and sustain them, would help level the playing field and allow women leaders to flourish in a role they clearly desire and excel at. **Women often succeed as mayor, but their success comes at a much higher material and personal cost to them and their cities.**

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

US democracy is at a crossroads, with threats to civil rights, the social safety net, and economic security. While these threats are multifaceted, one key issue is the systemic barriers that impede women's political participation. These barriers make it difficult for women to get elected, create hostile environments once they are in office, and ultimately discourage them from staying in their positions or seeking higher office. This "pipeline problem" directly impacts the health of our democracy, denying or weakening the American public's access to creative, thoughtful, and effective leadership.

Our data indicates that the persistent underrepresentation of women in the role of the mayor is not due to a lack of qualification but rather to systemic barriers, which result in enormous personal costs to women. Barriers include a lack of access to financial networks and political patronage, negative stereotypes in media, online harassment, threats to physical safety, and a lack of traditional recruitment methods targeted towards women. Once in office, both legal and cultural challenges to women's authority inhibits their ability to lead at their full capacity. These barriers cost women time on the job, time with their families, income that they would otherwise earn at other jobs, personal privacy, security, and their mental and physical health. In interviews, women mayors emphasized that the current system is simply not accessible for people with lower incomes or people with caregiving responsibilities—the majority of whom are women. One mayor explained, "the system has been set up for retirees and ultra privileged individuals to serve."

But this is not just a problem for women.

This is a problem for everyone, because underrepresentation of women in elected office is a problem for our democracy. As barriers discourage women from running or push women out of office, communities lose out on qualified leaders. Cities governed by women frequently rank among the best places to live and work.[4] Research from the United Nations confirms that when women lead, they propose and pass more equitable policies and services that focus on social issues such as healthcare, education, and community development, leading to a higher quality of life for all residents.[5] Furthermore, studies consistently show that women are more likely to work across party lines and lead collaboratively.[6] Reducing systematic barriers and increasing support for women in political office leads to more inclusive and impactful policies and supports a thriving and representative democracy.

Only 32% of women in our interview study said they would personally run again, and only 17% said they would definitively run for higher office.

Increasing representation in the mayor's office gives constituents access to a different type of leader and potentially more access to decision-making. Many women mayors in our study shared reasons why, despite the negativity and challenges, they desire to persist in their positions and to create access to the position for future women leaders. "I'm hyper conscious that there might be women . . . who might not feel comfortable making an appointment with their elected representative if it means they're going to close the door and be alone with a man. Which means they're never getting fully represented. Making sure that they have access to representation is important. So, I don't [always] love [the job], but I see the impact."

4. AARP Public Policy Institute, "*AARP Livability Index,*" accessed September 10, 2025, **https://livabilityindex.aarp.org/?cmp=RDRCT-32043cc7-20200401**.

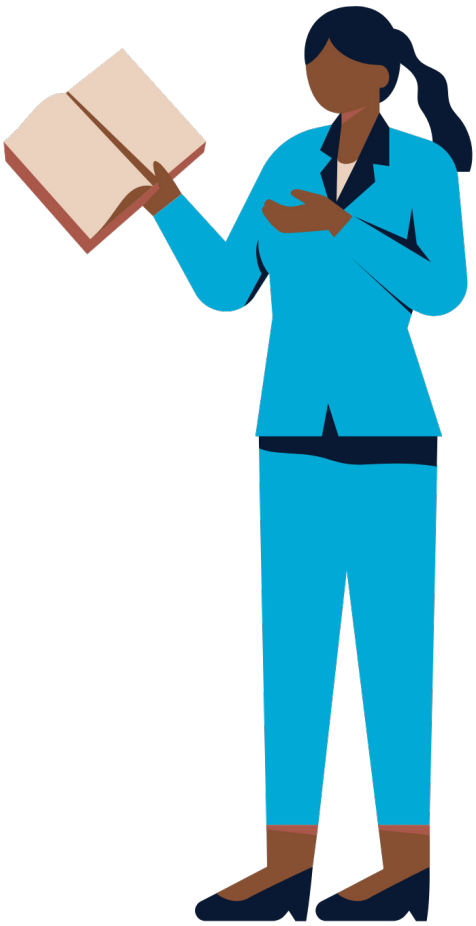
5. UN-Habitat, "*Women-led Cities: Pioneering a Path to Gender Equality,*" June 29, 2023, accessed September 10, 2025, **https://unhabitat.org/news/29-jun-2023/women-led-cities-pioneering-a-path-to-gender-equality**.

6. Women Deliver, "*Why Women in Politics?*", accessed September 10, 2025, **https://womendeliver.org/why-women-in-politics/**.

The good news is that actively supporting women in public office can strengthen our democracy. Many resources—time, energy, and a considerable amount of money—are spent reinforcing systemic barriers to women's political leadership. The data and experiences shared in this report and across a number of other studies demonstrates that investing resources to support women in government is a powerful way to boost representation, advance policies that improve people's lives, and bolster a democracy that is flagging.

NEVERTHELESS, SHE PERSISTED

In the face of significant challenges, women mayors still believe in the power of service, believe it's important work for women, and take steps to make the work more possible for themselves and for other women. **Despite the overwhelming systemic and individual barriers that women mayors face, female survey respondents reported that they would encourage others to run for mayor at nearly identical rates to male respondents**—79% of women and 80% of men said they would encourage others to run for office.



Women have found ways to succeed in the role and make progress in the cities they serve, and they are eager to share these tools and strategies with current and upcoming women mayors. Many women mayors expressed that they wished someone had been honest about the reality of all that comes with being a woman in the office of the mayor and how they could prepare for it. In interviews and our survey, we asked women mayors what strategies, tools, resources, and practices have helped support them. Answers ranged from family support to therapy to faith communities to a daily exercise regimen.

Key resources women mayors shared that were instrumental in their success were educational leadership training sessions and cohorts, resources that the Women Mayors Network provides. In the same way that professionals in other fields need continuing education, mayors need training to be the best leaders possible for their communities. One mayor shared, "One thing that really helped me was the Harvard Bloomberg Leadership Academy . . . . It was one of those experiences where you didn't feel so alone. And it's like, [all mayors are] going through this. It's not just me. And there's comfort in that. But also having each other to talk to . . . having experts come in and talk to you. You can learn from each other. That was invaluable . . . I really think that that made all the difference for me. It kept me strong." Other mayors reiterated that the people they met at training sessions have continued to serve as resources that they call upon when they face challenges.

Additionally, mayors shared that having supportive staff, who cared about them as human beings, allowed them to be more successful in their mayoral role. One mayor shared, "who was doing your scheduling is probably the most important . . . . I now block my schedule before 9 am so I can take my kids to school . . . . I miss so many evenings with my kids. And so having that morning block, like breakfast, no rushing, getting up, and just hanging out with them is really important. And my chief of staff, who does the scheduling, [will notice] that's a non-school day. [As mayor] you're always going 100 directions. But I am so much more successful, so much more able to do things because the person that is putting my calendar together thinks through all of these things for me, because you just don't have the brain space to do that."

Above all, one resource came up over and over again in interviews: fellow female electeds, specifically current or former women mayors. Women mayors shared that the role is isolating and having a community of supportive peers is critical for success. "When you're a council member, you're one of [many]. And then when you become Mayor, you're one of one. You don't have anybody else to go and talk to," explained one woman mayor. Leaning on other women who understood their experiences was invaluable for many of the women we spoke to.

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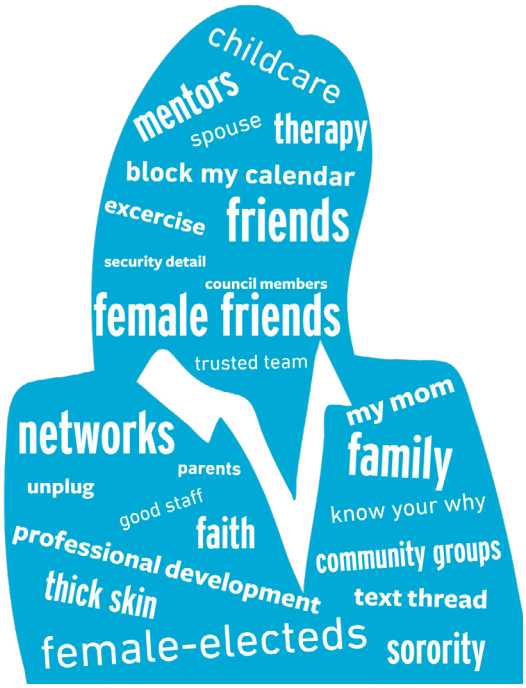

WOMEN MAYORS SHARED THE IMPORTANCE OF PEERS IN INTERVIEWS:

"Luckily, I have a former female mayor [to talk to] . . . she's a rockstar. And I go to her with a lot of my stress because she's seen everything. And she has seen it like tenfold more than what I have experienced."

"I think this, this Women's Mayor Network is really important . . . . I think oftentimes, when I've talked to other women mayors . . . I can just feel for what those women are going through."

"Networking, getting with other women mayors and others, you know, and having those cohorts talk about what's working for you, what's not . . . . It's just important we have each other's back because we have to."

"It took me a while to realize that I could form a cohort of women mayors or other mayors to talk to . . . . Because I feel like I didn't know anything until like nine months in. And then I was like, oh, I have friends. Great."

"At the very beginning of the pandemic, I got looped into this group of women mayors . . . . And it was invaluable to hear their stories. And I wish I had had that earlier in my journey."

"[I'm in an] informal women mayors' group. Particularly during COVID, having that group to lean on was really important. So there's value in just women mayors, and there are things that we experience that our male counterparts don't, and it's nice to have a place for that."

"My saving grace was my fellow female elected officials [in my region]."

While having support from fellow female electeds is wonderful, asking women to be resilient and rely on each other is neither an adequate nor a sustainable response to the barriers they face each day. There are tangible policy responses that can be put in place to lessen the burden placed on women in elected office. For the job to be more accessible to women, women mayors shared that they needed more resources, including increased pay and benefits, childcare, security, funding for professional development and networking opportunities, and funding for supportive staff.

These costs are not frivolous; they are critical investments that enable the best person for the job to serve their communities. "You get what you pay for . . . me [being at conferences] is work because I'm establishing relationships that might get [my city] money later. Me going to dinner with the Congressman is work. It's not me just going to dinner . . . when [my city] gets [money from the state], it's not just because the congressman got paperwork, it's because he knows who I am. And so, understanding that that work requires me to have $100 set aside for a babysitter so that I can have that meeting is really important," shared one mayor. In interviews, several women mayors shared that they are actively trying to make the role of the mayor better by advocating for policies like increased travel budgets, salaries, and family leave. "I absolutely am trying to do everything I can to make the road behind me wider," said one woman mayor.

WHAT CAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS DO?

Cities need strong leaders to thrive, especially as pressures and expectations at the local level continue to mount. To attract and retain qualified leaders, cities must provide support and resources and enact supportive policies so that mayors are safe, equipped to make decisions, lead with confidence and integrity, and serve their residents. Of course, there is a reason that many cities do not enact policies to make it easier for women and people of color to serve: to protect the status quo. The current system enables people with time, money, and influence to gain and hold political power, and any threats to that system are bound to bring political backlash.

Below are policy recommendations for local governments to foster supportive working environments:

- **Offer or support nonpartisan training programs, mentorship opportunities, learning experiences, and professional development for mayors.** There is a pervasive misperception of mayors taking advantage of travel opportunities related to training and professional development, often referred to as "vacations" or "junkets," borne out by little data. Professional conferences and training programs for local elected leaders are a great opportunity to share city successes, learn from peers, and bring back resources and ideas to your city.
- **Support staffing decisions and staff dedicated to the mayor.** A number of women that we interviewed called out having good, supportive staff as key to feeling supported professionally. We recommend broad support for mayors having staff dedicated to them.

- **Create and reimagine opportunities for constituents, especially women and people of color, that demystify the process and promote civic engagement.** Examples include Civic Academies and participatory budgeting processes. The majority of the public does not understand what local governments—including the mayor—actually do and have authority over. Educating the public about civic processes and roles can help build trust in government and develop new pathways for people to engage with their local government.

- **Support women and families** with anti-harassment policies and procedures, paid leave policies, and access to childcare services.

- **Dedicate time and space to city council retreats and other opportunities to encourage collaborative, respectful communication.** It's hard to recruit good candidates when your elected body is—or is perceived as—divisive and combative. Council retreats offer an opportunity for the elected body to come together to focus on process over policy, to get to know one another as human beings, and to create norms and standards for conduct in political office that benefit the wider community.

- **Conduct pay equity disparity studies and raise wages:** While strong, full time mayors and mayors in larger cities tend to receive higher pay, many of the women we spoke with—regardless of form of government or city size—are not paid anything close to a living wage. Local governments should undertake a pay equity study, which analyzes job duties alongside qualifications, experience, and pay to assess wage gaps based on characteristics like gender and race. Higher and fairer wages increase access to local political office, attract talent, and help reduce disproportionate challenges in running for and serving in office identified here, such as financial barriers and unpaid caregiving responsibilities.

- **If allowed in your state, consider adopting or enacting Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).** RCV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference; if one candidate receives more than half of the initial ballots, they win. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the voters who picked that candidate as their first choice have their second choice counted. This continues until a candidate exceeds the 50 percent threshold. Data in localities using RCV have shown an increase in women and people of color running in—and winning—elections. A report by RepresentWomen found that cities with RCV systems elect more women than cities with traditional plurality voting systems, suggesting that RCV is an effective way to encourage fairer elections with more representative and equitable outcomes.[7]

7. RepresentWomen, "*Memo: Ranked Choice Voting and Women's Representation*", January 23, 2023, RepresentWomen, accessed September 10, 2025, **https://www.representwomen.org/rcv_day_memo_jan_2023**.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Support reasonable increases in safety and security.** Many mayors we spoke to shared that when they pursued efforts to increase security of their home, office, or themselves, they were met with pushback of the actions being excessive, combative, or self-serving. Many have resorted to using their own money to litigate cases related to their position, hire personal security, or increase their security—necessitated by their role—at home or at work. In light of the many instances of physical and psychological threats, harassment, and actions documented here and in other research (and the media) recently, it's critical to build public and media support for reasonable requests for safety-related staffing and infrastructure in a way that does not hinder the democratic process.

- **Challenge (and address) your own biases.** Members of the public and the media should undergo implicit bias training to confront their own unconscious biases, which everyone has. Related biases include not just obvious references to gender and race, but also to family structure, marital status, and appearance. The media should focus exclusively on qualifications and impact—there is simply no reason for news stories to reference a mayor or mayoral candidate's appearance, clothing, or family structure.

- **Call out bias when you see or hear it.** On social media, in mainstream media, in public spaces, equip yourself with the skills to identify bias and to challenge it. This is especially important for those with some form of implicit power, influence, and visibility: others in elected office—especially white men, the media, businesses owners, etc.

- **Engage with local government.** Attend council meetings and budget hearings, inquire about civic engagement opportunities, serve on a committee, understand the different roles and powers of your local government, and/or consider running for local office. Local government is the truest and most intimate form of local democracy, and everyone benefits from increased engagement and understanding.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This report presents data and stories demonstrating the many unique barriers and challenges women face when seeking and serving in the mayoral role. **The discouraging news is that there are so many; the good news is that these systemic barriers are not inherent to the political process or to the attributes of gender or race, but are socially constructed. That means that while they are entrenched, they are not fixed; together, we can work to change them.** We've presented here a number of tangible actions that individuals and local governments can take to improve the policy landscape and support the safety and well-being of local elected officials, and shared what women themselves have said they need to support them in their executive leadership roles.

It is our hope that this report raises awareness about the challenges women mayors face, demonstrates a need for additional research and broader dialogue on their impact, and inspires action to support women in executive leadership. Let's transform awareness into action. The safety and well-being of our leaders, and the integrity of our local democracy, depend on it.

“WHEN YOU’RE OUT THERE, YOU MAY THINK, WHY ME? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME? HECK, IT’S HAPPENING TO OTHERS JUST LIKE YOU IN A TOTALLY DIFFERENT STATE. YOU JUST DON’T KNOW. BUT THE MORE WE SHARE THESE STORIES, THE MORE WE CAN HELP OTHER WOMEN TO COMBAT THOSE ISSUES AND THOSE CHALLENGES AND TO TALK ABOUT ORGANIZATIONS THAT WILL SUPPORT YOU.”

WOMEN MAYORS
NETWORK

THE MAYORS INNOVATION PROJECT

is a learning network among American mayors committed to "high road" policy and governance: shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. We are a project of High Road Strategy Center. This work is generously supported by the Barbara Lee Family Foundation.

mayors
innovation
project

7122 SEWELL BUILDING
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON
MADISON, WI 53706

TEL 608-262-5387

INFO@MAYORSINNOVATION.ORG

MAYORSINNOVATION.ORG

@MAYORINNOVATION