

# Research-in-Brief

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## Called to Speak: Six Strategies That Encourage Women's Political Activism

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*This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings of a larger report that analyzes the experiences of women working as social justice activists within nonprofit religious groups. The report is the second in a series on women, religion, and public life.*

**A**cross the country, women are answering a call to speak. Their activism is evident in community halls, congregations, and schools, in cities, towns, and rural areas. In all these settings, women are providing leadership, labor, and passion towards improving the lives and well-being of their communities.

In recent years, interfaith community organizing has been recognized as a place where women play relatively visible roles as political activists. This type of organizing brings together individuals across congregations and denominations to address social welfare issues. Within interfaith community groups, women have achieved impressive levels of leadership: as the leaders of local and national organizations, and, according to one study, as approximately half of all board members and organizers (Warren and Wood 2001). In this work, women's leadership is significant to communities across the country, because religious community organizing is "second in size only to the labor movement among drives for social justice among low-income Americans today" (Wood 2002; 6).

Women are claiming a specifically political role in interfaith community groups. In a series of interviews by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) with women and men involved with religious organizing, three-quarters of participants describe their work as political. They are engaged in changing policies that shape the conditions of people's lives.

Women's work in interfaith community organizing is particularly important because in American life generally, women are

less politically active than men. Although women report higher voter turnout than men, fewer women participate in informal political activities directed at solving community problems, are affiliated with organizations that take political stances, or contact their elected officials about issues or policies (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Interfaith community groups seem to provide women opportunities for political activism that many other groups do not.

How can other groups follow their lead? This Research-in-Brief summarizes six successful strategies that interfaith community groups use to encourage women's political involvement. Based on interviews with women activists in religious community groups across the country, it also provides an overview of why these organizations have developed strategies for increasing women's leadership and involvement, and why the programs they have developed are successful, by outlining why women often hesitate to act in the first place.

"It would be very difficult to [work with our organization] and not have some transformation occur, because the work that we do and the people that we serve—a lot of the people we serve don't have a strong voice in the community, and so you are called to be that voice.... You may speak only in your community, you may speak only in your church, but I can't imagine not being called to speak."

### WOMEN'S HESITATIONS WITH PUBLIC VOICE

In our interviews, women describe many reasons for not acting politically. Some are simply disillusioned with politics, arguing that our political system is unresponsive, particularly to those who are not economically and racially privileged. Some describe a general discomfort with leadership or any public role of authority. Many, however, describe a basic resistance to thinking of political activism as appropriate to their lives as

women—they just don't think of politics as “women's” place. Many also describe a fundamental discomfort with expressing anger or outrage, which they see as violating an ethic of care, collaboration, or peace that seems more appropriate to their lives as women, often particularly as religious women. Women of color, immigrant women, and those from smaller U.S. religions describe another layer of difficulty: fear of physical or political retribution for speaking out, based on histories of abuse and exclusion.

Women also face considerable limitations once they *want* to play a public political role. Almost every woman we interviewed described some kind of experience with resistance from men, from being ignored, to being asked to help with the food rather than speak publicly, to being publicly slapped.

Within religious organizations, resistance to women's public roles can be particularly acute. At a basic level, men's dominance of leadership in almost all religions sends a message that only men can rightfully claim it. At a deeper level, most religious traditions have assigned women specific roles focused on family, children, and private life, which have been used to exclude them from public forms of leadership. Often, such traditions are presented as inherently and fundamentally moral—making them even more difficult to challenge.

Most of the women we interviewed recognize their religions' patriarchal histories and traditions. Within their congregations, most have noticed or personally experienced the ramifications of this history, and they express frustration with what it means for their roles within them. In fact, some interviewees had sought out interfaith settings as a place of more freedom to take on religious leadership. Despite their frustrations, though, many women remain within their congregations because of their commitment to most of the values those congregations represent.

This is not an uncommon position for women generally, of course. The religious, economic, social, and cultural systems that structure our lives all shape women's expectations and roles. Even when women are frustrated with the expectations facing them, most conform to those roles to at least some extent, because the risks of not conforming are too high. In political work, facing and potentially defying expectations requires women both to confront their hesitations about claiming a public voice—a voice historically denied them—and to step out of a place of safety. It requires taking profound responsibility for one's life and the life of the community. And it requires women to embrace the anger and outrage that many are uncomfortable expressing, particularly in public settings.

Asking women to undertake this process, then, is no small task. It is by no means impossible, however, and a variety of community-based groups have devoted time and energy to mobilizing women's participation, often quite effectively. The

key to their success lies in directly addressing the obstacles to women's public voice.

## STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Overall, programs that encourage women's political activism provide women something both simple and profound: the resources and opportunities to answer a call to speak. The groups observed in this study provide this in a variety of ways, summarized in the recommendations below.

Two notes about these lessons and strategies. First, this Research-in-Brief highlights strategies that benefit *women's* political activism and leadership. Many books and manuals have been written on community organizing, and they contain effective strategies for mobilizing and sustaining citizen involvement (e.g., Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001, Gecan 2002, Jacobsen 2001). This report, however, focuses on women's experiences.

Second, these strategies were developed specifically in religious and mostly interfaith settings. That matters for at least two reasons. First, religion is not traditionally a place of women's leadership, and in these settings women often face particular resistance to their claims of authority. At the same time, religious settings offer a place where religious values, traditions, and symbolism can be used to inspire concerns and passions for social justice—particularly among women, who are more religious than men.

Still, many of the lessons described here can be used and adapted by both religious and non-religious groups trying to mobilize women politically. Each has been identified by women activists as successfully encouraging and supporting their political work, and we suspect that they have promise for doing so outside religious settings.

### #1: Provide Political Role Models of Women Who Break the Mold

One strategy for promoting women's political voice is to hold up role models for women's political activism, in order to expand their sense of what is possible and appropriate for women's lives. As a first step, groups can ensure that women are in positions of organizational leadership, particularly in their political work. In our interviews, many women reported being attracted to their organization by women's leadership. In addition, in most organizations led by women, women were also the majority of staff and volunteers. In contrast, groups with male leaders were generally more mixed.

Organizations can also provide role models for women's activism and leadership using historical or scriptural figures. A common figure cited by Jewish or Christian women, for example, is the Biblical model of Esther, who stood up to her husband, the king of Persia, to save her Jewish people. Islamic groups use figures such as Fatima or Aisha to exemplify women's strength and political savvy. Organizations can also refer to more recent examples of women's religious and political activism, such as Dorothy Day, Delores Huerta, or Fannie Lou Hamer. The examples these models provide suggest that women do not violate religious principles or values by participating in political activism, and that women can work as effective and powerful religious and political authorities. In many cases, they also exemplify women using anger and outrage as a form of inspiration directing their work.

## **#2: Provide Space for Women to Address Their Fears and Embrace Their Anger**

Groups can also provide targeted opportunities for women to discuss their barriers to political activism. This space can be offered in workshops, retreats, or other training settings, especially those devoted specifically to women's public voice. Larger existing training programs, particularly those that deal with questions of power and authority, can also include components dedicated to addressing women's psychological barriers to political work.

Many community organizations use training as a way to involve people in civic and political activism, with a long and effective history of producing political leadership among both men and women. Only rarely, however, do training programs analyze the gender-based roles and expectations that shape women's experiences in their communities, including their organizing or political work. But this kind of analysis can effectively empower women's activism. In our interviews, women reported that when training includes discussions of the influence of gender on their lives and experiences, they embrace the topic with enthusiasm.

Groups that incorporate gender analysis into their work use many techniques. One is to give women space to interpret religious values, traditions, and symbols that acknowledge and celebrate their lives and experiences. Workshops can focus on the power of women's religious leadership in scripture, history, or contemporary life, for example, or incorporate feminist, womanist, or *mujerista* theologies and interpretations of texts. Another strategy involves providing women the space to name and explore their psychological barriers to politics and leadership. Such programs encourage women to think about why they might be uncomfortable taking on a public

role, often using a number of strategies: role plays and public readings on the issues being addressed, group discussions facilitated by leaders who push women to share and analyze their experiences publicly, one-on-one conversations that follow up on concerns and hesitations, even simple opportunities to stand up in front of a larger group and talk about what holds women back. These techniques have several underlying goals: to engage women's personal emotions so that they are more comfortable expressing their anger, to link their private lives and roles with their public hesitations, and to articulate and assert their self-interest.

The most effective programs for empowering women's political participation allow women to define the terms and topics of conversation about the issues facing them, rather than imposing concepts from traditional training programs, which have often been developed and defined by men in male-dominated settings. Not only can this process give women the experience of taking on voice and leadership, but it encourages them to bring their own experiences and concerns to the table. Women can explore what matters to *them* most deeply, and how issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or religious difference—as well as personal relationships, joys, and tragedies—have shaped their lives.

## **#3: Build Connections Across Lines of Race and Class**

Another strategy for empowering women's public voice involves building connections among women across race and class. Crossing these lines can encourage a sense of empathy that inspires commitment, build a sense of mutual responsibility for social justice, and show women that some of their hesitations with public voice are shared. Through these experiences, women are empowered to take on more public roles.

Groups can encourage relationships across race and class lines by bringing together women from different backgrounds to explore their common and distinct experiences. For example, groups might create multicultural settings in workshops designed to address women's barriers to public voice, so that diverse women can see that their experiences have common threads. This, in turn, can encourage women to feel more confident in their ability to defy the expectations and limits placed on them.

This kind of relationship building is particularly effective if it includes women who are already in leadership positions within organizations. Many women interviewed said that hearing about the fears of their leaders and role models helped them overcome their own.

#### **#4: Gently Push Women into Political Leadership (with Force if Necessary)**

A fourth effective strategy for promoting women's political activism is to ease—and then push—women into leadership in political settings. Groups can start by giving women relatively low-risk opportunities to lead, then gradually move them into more responsible and public roles, somewhat forcefully if necessary. This approach gives women opportunities to practice taking positions of authority in relatively safe spaces. Over time, though, groups should transition women into increasingly public—and political—roles. Sometimes, this can mean insisting that women do so. Within religious groups, this strategy can be particularly effective if it also involves giving women opportunities to take on roles that combine political and religious leadership, because women have relatively few chances to do so within traditional religious settings.

Groups gradually encourage women into leadership in a variety of ways. Some create internal settings for women to lead, asking them to present on issues or strategies at staff meetings, board meetings, or similar forums. Women are then asked to apply their knowledge to more public settings. Other groups use tools such as interview projects or focus groups to encourage women of similar backgrounds to share their concerns, which they are then asked to present in more public forums. Others formally insist that all staff participate in public speaking or other roles and give them only a handful of “byes” before they are required to fulfill this duty.

Encouraging women to take on increasing levels of political leadership often feeds on itself: it inspires new women to act by providing them public role models. Once women take on political leadership, they send a message that their organizations trust women enough to represent them—and thus to be an authority on political and/or religious values.

#### **#5: Develop Mentoring Programs with Activist Components**

Groups can also promote women's activism by adopting politically oriented mentoring programs. This strategy is one of the most frequently used, and it is still important to many women: in our study, approximately two-thirds of the women interviewed described mentoring as significant to their political involvement.

Mentoring often combines several of the strategies described above: providing role models, giving women space to address issues of public voice, and helping them take on increasingly public roles. It can involve many kinds of interaction. For example, it can mean passing along specific skill sets, such

as how to facilitate meetings, how to fundraise, how to lead others diplomatically, even how to operate new technology. It can focus on the intangibles of how to survive life in the nonprofit world: how not to burn out, or how to assess power relationships. It can even address how to survive as women in social justice organizing. The best political mentoring programs involve ongoing conversation and advice, coaching women to take on increasingly responsible opportunities to become politically active and make decisions about political strategies.

Although both men and women can be effective mentors, most of the women we interviewed argued that a woman mentor could more effectively address the specific difficulties that women have as they claim political space. For the same reason, women of color and women from the smaller U.S. religions found that mentors from similar backgrounds could help them address their fears and concerns.

#### **#6: Meet Women Where They Are**

A final set of strategies involves recognizing the rhythms and patterns of women's lives as often different from men's. To recruit women into political work, groups must recognize where women are—and meet them there.

The patterns of women's lives, of course, differ from community to community, often based on factors such as race, education, and income. First and foremost, groups should listen to what women in their communities say about how to engage them, by asking women about their responsibilities and their concerns. For example, because women are generally more responsible for their children's well-being, they are often more involved in institutions such as child care centers and schools, and groups might look to these and similar settings to find and engage women as volunteers. Low-income women may need help finding services that will ease the strains of having fewer resources, including basics such as housing or food. Organizations that combine service and political work often effectively draw low-income women into activism.

Groups should also consider how they work with congregations to recruit volunteers. Within congregations, women are less frequently tapped for positions of leadership than men are. As a result, relying primarily on clergy and other religious leadership to serve as or identify potential volunteers or leaders—as many religious community groups do—may exclude potential activists who are women.

At a basic level, groups should consider women's perspectives in choosing and analyzing the issues and policies they address. Are their policy positions as compelling to women's lives as

they are to men's? Do proposed policies consider how women might be affected differently? Groups can likely engage more women in political activism if they promote issues that will make a difference to women's well-being.

## CASE STUDY: THE NTOSAKE WOMEN'S TRAINING PROGRAM, GAMALIEL FOUNDATION

For over twenty years, the Gamaliel Foundation has been training community organizers to advocate around housing, transportation, and other community welfare issues. Originally established in 1968 to fight discrimination by financial institutions on Chicago's Westside, in 1986 Gamaliel was restructured into an organizing institute that supports community leaders as they develop organizations in low-income communities. Gamaliel now has more than 45 affiliates in 17 U.S. states and three provinces of South Africa.

Mary Gonzales, a founder and now Director of Western Territory for Gamaliel, was Gamaliel's first woman trainer. In that role, she was approached by several women members who insisted that they needed an alternative training model to address their particular barriers to leadership. Working with them, Gonzales helped found a new training program for women, named Ntosake, a South African word meaning "she who walks with lions and carries her own things."

Gonzales points to several key elements of the training. First, it was designed by women themselves, using a model that transforms and complements elements of Gamaliel's national training program, rather than simply replicating it in a women-only setting. Second, the model addresses the links between women's private or family lives, their emotions, and their public work. It encourages women to tap into the emotional core of their community activism, and it acknowledges that elements of women's private lives shape their public experiences, by affecting their opportunities and expectations and by shaping their priorities in public life.

A central part of the Ntosake training is encouraging women to rethink their ideas about religious faith, anger, and power. Many women who attend are uncomfortable with anger as a religious value: they see it instead as destructive and unholy. Gamaliel, however, encourages women to consider how religious figures have used their anger as inspiration. It offers models of women's power, from Audre Lorde to Mother Jones. It encourages women to move into their gut so that they do less "screening" of their anger—it tries to move women away from their constant concerns about being "good girls."

Another central concept in Ntosake is self-interest. Trainers argue that women often let others define their interests, and that women must be aware of and comfortable with asserting their own self-interest. As a trainer said in one session, "As long as you are a nobody I can shape you." The training explicitly asks women to define self-interest outside of marriage and family—here, again, Ntosake encourages women to link but distinguish between public and private. Trainers connect the concept of self-interest to women's faith lives, arguing that only by embracing their own power and self-interest do women manifest God in the world.

Ntosake trainers argue that the basic community organizing tools of confrontation and agitation—often done in one-on-one sessions with colleagues, but also with political figures—are strategies that women should embrace as a religious act. As the facilitator of one training session said, "When we do agitation we say, I see God in you." Importantly, this concept is key to how the program itself is run. Although it is emotionally draining, and often fairly confrontational itself, trainers affirm and embrace participants in a way that expresses their fundamental respect for each other. This helps women engage in the difficult process of examining their lives and fears, including the risks of taking on a public role.

Another effective component of Ntosake is that it brings together women from a variety of backgrounds to encourage their leadership development. A typical training involves Latina, African American, Asian American, and white women; women with doctorates and those who never finished high school; ministers, lay people, and agnostics; welfare recipients, college professors, and retirees. This experience can be a profound way to empower women's public voice. Involving diverse women, of course, also develops leadership among women from a wide variety of backgrounds, which in turn provides a deep pool for role modeling women's leadership within the organization.

Gamaliel has reaped tremendous benefits from Ntosake in the years since its founding:

*Within three years, 50 percent of all the presidents in [the group] became women. And suddenly, I wasn't the only [woman] trainer. There were ten women training... If you ask [our director] today, has the training changed in the last 20 years, he'd say absolutely. And if you asked him what was the major change, he would say the women who began to train.*

Ntosake's leaders hope to build on the success of the program to influence the programmatic work of Gamaliel. As Gonzales says,

*My constant agitation to the women of Gamaliel is, when is your stuff going to get on the table? Every time I hear the issue platform, it's always male stuff: Violence, housing, land development, transportation systems. Those are the things men think about. But the things that women have to struggle with, the care of elderly parents, the quality of schools, whether there are Head Start programs for working parents or working mothers, single mothers, health care—those issues are not getting on the table.... We've got to somehow politicize the women to say this isn't only about community stuff; it's about politics; it's about power.*

These efforts have made inroads, as some of Gamaliel's affiliates have started promoting local policies with women's issues in mind. Recent efforts, for example, have promoted set-asides for women among government contracts for construction and transportation jobs, and Gonzales hopes to pursue similar set-asides for single-mother families in subsidized housing.

Ntosake exemplifies the effectiveness of several strategies for mobilizing women. It provides a women-centered and -designed program that deals with the specific psychological barriers women have to politics. It is especially concerned with teaching women to embrace power and anger on behalf of change. It accomplishes this by linking women's political activism to faith values, scripture, and religious figures, and in doing so, it defines religious work broadly to encompass activism itself. Finally, it brings together women from diverse communities and encourages them to share their experiences,

dreams, and hesitations. Together, these elements have helped Ntosake, and Gamaliel, develop women's public roles.

## CONCLUSION: WOMEN AND PUBLIC VOICE

Fundamentally, the strategies outlined here are about women claiming a voice of authority in areas where they have traditionally been excluded—religion and politics. Many of the most successful tactics directly confront women's hesitations and concerns with claiming this voice. They encourage women to break out of the limits of their given roles and expectations. This can be a difficult process for many women, but community organizing groups devoted to increasing women's leadership and activism have identified and developed effective strategies to facilitate it.

Once involved, many women are addicted to politics, especially when they see the impact of their work. Over and over again, women describe a process of finding their voice—and then growing more and more comfortable with it. They depict the joy and pride of articulating their values and making a difference in their communities: by changing a law or regulation, impacting the opinion of an elected official, or simply encouraging other women to speak for themselves.

Helping women take that initial step, though, is both crucial and, in many cases, difficult. We hope that an increasing number of organizations will prioritize cultivating women's political activism and leadership. Doing so is crucial to building a truly inclusive American democracy.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This Research-in-Brief summarizes the findings and conclusions of a larger report, *Called To Speak: Six Strategies That Encourage Women's Political Activism, Lessons from Interfaith Community Organizing*. Our recommendations are based on three main sources: themes observed within interviews conducted for the study, strategies articulated as effective by women who had experienced them (again within the interviews), and observations by IWPR researchers of programs developed by organizations.

The interviews conducted for the project consisted of 75 in-depth, qualitative conversations with 68 women and 7 men working as volunteers, staff, or leaders of nonprofit groups working on social justice issues. All but a few groups involved in the study have a religious focus, and most are interfaith—operating as independent organizations that can be affiliated with but are not solely run by a specific congregation or denomination. Interviews were conducted in Atlanta, Chicago, Southern California, and Washington, DC. Participants were 15 percent each African American and Hispanic, 9 percent Asian American, 5 percent Arab American, and 55 percent non-Hispanic white. Participants were two-thirds Christian, almost evenly divided among Catholics, mainline Protestants, white or Hispanic evangelicals, and African American evangelicals. The remaining third was almost evenly divided among Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Unitarian Universalists, with one Sikh and one Baha'i. For more information on research methodology for this study, see the full report entitled *Called To Speak*.

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