Having a Voice, Being Heard: Lessons on Gender Dynamics in Policy Conversations

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Abstract: Women’s voices have reshaped the fabric of American policymaking, yet gendered dynamics continue to shape who speaks, who is heard, and how influence is wielded in policy conversations. Drawing on interviews with thirteen women across policymaking, lobbying, and academia, this paper explores how women navigate male-dominated spaces, adapting their communication styles, building confidence, and leveraging support networks to assert their voices. The findings highlight persistent challenges, such as interruptions and microaggressions, but also underscore the resilience and strategies women have developed to ensure their contributions are recognized. While women have made remarkable strides in leadership across sectors, the double standards they face remain. This paper contributes to the understanding of conversational gender dynamics in policy settings and calls for continued attention to the intersectionality of gender with race, ethnicity, and other identities in shaping women’s experiences. Ultimately, the resilience and ingenuity of women in policy stand as a testament to the ongoing evolution of leadership and womanhood, where having a voice and being truly heard remain distinct, hard-fought achievements.

"I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue–my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence." –Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987)

The voices of women today resonate deeper and reach further into the fabric of American government than our predecessors ever envisioned. A century ago, the milestone of women's suffrage was a hard-won victory, but true political power remained elusive, and the fight to uproot sexism was far from over.

Today, female leaders are essential across every major political institution in America. We have seen women serve as Speaker of the House, Vice President, and a presidential candidate who secured over 70 million votes (Pew Research Center, 2025). Women comprise half of the Supreme Court, over a quarter of Congress, and a third of state legislatures (Associated Press, 2024; Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP], 2025). Among the largest cities, women are a third of the mayors; we are half of the current presidential cabinet and a third of the nation's governors (CAWP, 2025; PBS Newshour, 2024).

These numbers illustrate the substantial progress women have made in political leadership, but they do not reflect the profound cultural shifts that facilitated it. Modern femininity goes beyond just having a seat at the table; we have demanded that our voices be heard and taken seriously. We claim space in conversations and defy norms of deference that once silenced us. We lean in and assert ourselves—and society has taken note.

I am unequivocally and unapologetically proud to be a woman. I am also fortunate that rarely do I *think* about being a woman. In lab meetings, I am simply a researcher; in university classes, a student; in conversations at the dinner table, just a participant. Thanks to progress won by the generations before mine, these spaces have become more level playing fields, so seldom have I been overly conscious of the peripheral thing that is my gender. To me, being a woman has always felt incidental, like having brown hair or freckles—an unremarkable fact of who I am, neither defining nor noteworthy.

It was during my internship on the Hill that I first became acutely aware of what it meant to move through the world as a woman in a male-dominated space. The formal and informal conversations I observed made it clear that gender dynamics play an undeniable role in determining who leads, who influences, and who is heard. I noticed many instances where I and other women were interrupted, spoken over, and subjected to subtle behaviors that undermined our contributions to policy discussions. These microaggressions played out everywhere: in hearings, meetings, hallways, and even casual chats over coffee. I soon noticed them in class discussions and with men I encountered at weekend social gatherings.

Interruptions were not the only behaviors I noticed. There were the cut-offs, yes, but also the physical signals of disengagement—the lack of eye contact while I spoke, as if to say *I do not care to hear what you're saying, and I'm already planning how to outmaneuver you*. I had spent my college years developing skills in policy analysis, rhetoric, and logical reasoning, but in

Washington, I came to understand these attributes were not always enough. Sometimes, the real battle was just getting a word in at all.

My voice—something that generations of women before me fought to secure—is perhaps the most valuable thing I hold. But there is another truth: having a voice and being truly heard are not the same. Only the latter signifies true participation as an equal.

Theoretical Background

While female representation in U.S. politics has grown, significant obstacles in conversational gender dynamics persist and have been measured at a macro scale. There is no shortage of literature illustrating these challenges: women speak less than men in mixed-gender groups, are more likely to be interrupted, and are more likely to speak on policy concerns with direct relevance to women (Coates, 2015; Osborn & Mendez, 2010).

A study by Emory researchers examined 24,000 hearings from 1994 to 2018 and quantified these disparities. The study found that women were significantly more likely to be interrupted during hearings, with the likelihood more than doubling in discussions centered on women's issues. Women were 44 times more likely to be victims of "interruption clusters" — instances of aggressive, rapid-fire interruptions. Interruptions were most common in mixed-gender interactions, with men significantly more likely to interrupt women than other men (Miller & Sutherland, 2023).

While existing research quantifies the entrenched gender dynamics in formal policymaking spaces, working on the Hill in a male-dominated policy field sparked my interest in the nuances of these interactions behind the scenes. I sought to explore several questions: Which sectors and policy areas are more progressive in conversational gender dynamics? What factors determine whose voices carry weight in discussions? Most notably, how have women adapted and asserted themselves to be heard? What strategies can entry-level women learn from those with long-standing careers in the field?

Methods

Interviews for this project were conducted between August and December 2025, both in person and through digital meeting platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Most participants were identified and recruited through my professional network in Washington, D.C., while I was working on the Hill as part of a congressional program that connects longtime staffers with young professionals. Interviewees in lobbying were contacted through connections from my internships in financial services, as well as alumnae from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Academic professionals were identified through my academic networks and referrals from advisors and previous participants.

Interviews ranged from 23 to 48 minutes in length and followed a semi-structured, conversational format. A standard set of questions guided the discussions while allowing space for participants to share insights organically (see Appendix A for the question guide).

General Trends Across Industries

This report explores themes and insights drawn from conversations with thirteen women across policymaking, government affairs, and academia. Of the participants, five were lobbyists, primarily representing the financial services industry—a notably male-dominated field. Another five were in policymaking, working in both the House and Senate across Republican and Democratic offices. The remaining two women held academic positions as professors and administrative leaders in their institutions.

Across interviews, women in policymaking frequently described being interrupted by male colleagues in both formal and informal conversations. These behaviors were especially pronounced in male-dominated fields, such as financial services, where participants often found themselves outnumbered and felt the need to assert themselves repeatedly to be heard. By contrast, interviewees working in fields with greater female representation, such as healthcare and budgeting, noted a greater sense of camaraderie and fewer interruptions.

The dynamics in each sector have evolved over time, with noticeable improvements overall. Lobbying, particularly within financial services, remains a challenging environment for women to navigate, characterized by high levels of competition and a culture that has been slow to change. Women in policymaking highlighted some progress, particularly as they gained seniority, although deeply ingrained norms persist. Academia, on the other hand, was described as comparatively more progressive. Women in this field cited a culture that, while not perfect, is more open to discussions about gender equity and less prone to interruptive behavior—especially among social scientists who are familiar with these nuances.

Financial Services and Lobbying

Nearly all the female lobbyists I interviewed—each of whom was in the financial services industry—were intimately familiar with interruptive and microaggressive behaviors in policy conversations. The financial services industry remains heavily male-dominated, with women comprising about half of the entry-level workforce but less than a third of the SVP and C-suite positions. Many of these women expressed frustration over how this imbalance spills into government affairs, affecting conversational dynamics in lobbying environments.

One woman, now the head of federal government relations for a major insurance firm, reflected on being interrupted throughout her career—from her early days as a DC intern to her current position at the top of the ladder. “I wish I didn’t have a recent example, but I do,” she said. Within the last two weeks, she had experienced excessive interruptions from a man during a meeting, who even questioned whether their male SVP colleague—a subordinate to her—needed to be present. Early in her career, she often felt typecast as a secretary, with the assumption that she was not involved in substantive policy work: “In earlier days in DC, overcoming the gender role of the ‘secretary position’ made it hard to be part of the conversation.” Although interruptions have become less frequent as she has advanced in her career, she still finds herself taking extra measures to ensure she is heard.

Another lobbyist who transitioned from the Hill to a lobbying group after earning her master’s degree shared a similar perspective. She recalled working under an “old school”

lobbyist and learning from seasoned women that male bullies are often all bark and no bite. "They're like big dogs," she explained. "They bark for a second, but they're really putting up a show." She emphasized that interruptions by men are prevalent in the lobbying world: "Everyone is trying to be the smartest in the room, sell themselves, and get new contacts." She pointed out that men tend to be more direct and assertive when asking for money: "They're a lot more pushy and demanding by nature. Women are bad at asking for money without apologizing." This aligns with data at the macro level: men initiate negotiations four times more frequently than women and, on average, request 30% more in financial negotiations (Babcock & Laschever, 2009).

A third interviewee in financial services lobbying noted how consistently men interrupted her or paid more attention to male colleagues, even when she was leading the meeting:

> "There have absolutely been times that this has impacted my confidence and ability to do my job. The more it happens, it naturally gets in your brain… like, fine, I'll just sit back and let him do the talking, because clearly it's going to happen anyway."

While she observed that this behavior has lessened somewhat as she climbed the ladder, it still persists: "It doesn't necessarily matter how high up you are; there is always a gravitation toward the male in the room." She recounted an event where her female head of office hosted members of Congress, only for the attendees to bypass her and approach the male counterpart, assuming he was the boss. "More often than not, I'm one of the only women in the room. People usually assume I'm just someone's assistant," she said.

The Vice President of Government Affairs and lead lobbyist for a prominent financial services lobbying group agreed that interruptions and gender gaps are especially prevalent in financial services advocacy. However, she noted signs of progress: "People are more present, understanding, and aware of these dynamics, especially in conversations, than they were 5 years ago." Reflecting on her early years in lobbying, she recounted frequently being the only woman at fundraising events: "As a woman in financial services, I think my tolerance for these things is a bit higher than others."

Another interviewee shared an anecdote about attending a women's financial services happy hour. When her boss questioned why there was not a similar event for men, she responded with a laugh: "Every financial services happy hour is a men's one."

Academia

Women's experiences in policy academia stand in notable contrast to those in corporate government affairs. While gender biases persist, academia is generally viewed as more progressive than other sectors. A study by researchers at Cornell and Boston University examined six aspects of academic life for tenure-track professors, revealing significant examples of gender equality, such as equal grant success rates between men and women, among other metrics (Ceci & Williams, 2023).

One professor reflected on her career in policy academia, unable to recall any memorable instances where men had interrupted or talked over her. She attributed this to the strong representation of women on faculty and in administrative roles at her institution. This aligns with broader trends: in 2021, women comprised 48% of full-time faculty, 47% of associate professors,

and 54% of assistant professors across all 4-year universities (Colby & Bai, 2023). “There’s always been a strong representation of women, but even more than that, men and academia know how to behave,” she observed. “They’re social scientists. They’ve read about [conversational sexism] explicitly in their academic readings.” She suggested that men in policy academia are often exposed to feminist arguments and diverse perspectives early on, which shapes more inclusive behavior compared to other fields.

Government work, in contrast, tends to lag behind in terms of cultural and technological progressiveness. “There are some places that are culturally more ahead,” she elaborated, “not even just with gender roles, but with things like clothing, technology, even standard of dress. Some of these guys in government are still in the printing-out emails stage. They’re just culturally behind on a lot of things.”

Another academic with a STEM-focused background provided a more critical perspective. Her research has examined the macro-level disparities in how women’s voices are and are not heard in scientific production.

> “Men publish more frequently and more overall. Even when accounting for differences, men are cited more, put in more newspapers, and invited more often to testify before Congress. From all the voices we hear in science, women’s voices are diminished at every point.”

She emphasized that balancing the composition of decision-making panels is key to amplifying women’s voices in these spaces: “When your work is being reviewed, you’re significantly more likely to have it accepted if at least one reviewer looks like you.” The problem, she noted, is that most scientific panels are predominantly male, creating a positive feedback loop that favors men and keeps them at the center of the system: “In grant-making, we’ve found that heterogeneity in panels neutralizes these gender disparities. Diversity reduces the tendency to conform.”

When asked why academia might be more progressive than government, she gave an interesting standpoint: social sciences adopt a critical, evidence-based stance on gender dynamics, and scientists are inherently open to evidence. She recalled giving a talk at a high-level administrative meeting about inequities in women’s voices in science. Afterward, the dean of engineering from another institution approached her, saying, “I’ve had to go to these DEI things for years, but your talk had error bars, so I’m convinced. How do we fix this?” Quantifying inequalities with evidence, she found, was persuasive: “Once you present evidence to scientists in a compelling way, they believe it. Policymaking doesn’t have the same sense of science-based evaluation.” Instead, policymakers often rely on personal experiences, which, when filtered through a male perspective, can reinforce existing biases. “When you go based on your own experience, you perpetuate the biases already embedded in society,” she explained.

Reflecting on policy conversations, she echoed sentiments from other interviewees: “I remember so many times when I walked into a room of all women and how incredibly freeing it felt. I didn’t have to watch my words as carefully, I didn’t have to worry about what I was wearing… didn’t have to look pretty enough so I wasn’t dismissed, but not too sexy that I was slutty. I could just *be*.”

Policymaking

Women's experiences in Congress varied widely. One Senate staffer in the healthcare sector shared particularly positive experiences. Early in her career, she worked for a lobbying firm and found her niche in healthcare policy—a field notably dominated by women: "Women dominate health policy because of our inherent traits. You're dealing with disease groups, complex healthcare issues—things that require empathy. Women tend to have those traits, empathy and patience." She noted feeling "very protected" by her current team, led by a female director and predominantly composed of women: "If a man interrupted me, someone would definitely call him out."

While she encountered fewer interruptions than women in other policy areas, she noted differences in communication styles: "Men look at things as wins; women look for common ground. They think to themselves, how can we all win in this process?" Her insights are substantiated by research on negotiation behavior, where men often choose metaphors like "winning a ballgame" or "a wrestling match" to describe negotiations, while women liken it to "going to the dentist" (Babcock & Laschever, 2009). In her book *You Just Don't Understand* (1990), linguist Deborah Tannen describes how men often approach conversations as competitions and aim to "win" the argument, whereas women prioritize consensus and cooperation. Tannen's work illustrates how these differences shape interactions, with men treating arguments as zero-sum games and women prioritizing consensus.

A staff director for a House subcommittee offered a contrasting perspective: "Looking back to my first job at a restaurant, I was constantly talked over. That pattern continued all the way through my policy career." She recalled being explicitly told to be a "good girl" when she was first hired on the Hill and described clerk meetings where the culture enabled men to dominate conversations and interrupt in ways women could not. Societal norms often condition women to be deferential, making it challenging to address interruptions or microaggressions directly: "We're socialized to never make a man feel wrong or minimized. This totally affected my sense of relevance and well-being."

Now, with years of experience behind her, she reflected on how her status has shifted treatment. "People actually listen to me now because I have a rank and title," she said. This theme—having to work hard to be heard—resonates with many women at all career stages: "Looking back, it's illustrative how much I had to work to have people listen to me."

Adaptations and Insights

Equally important to understanding the barriers women face in policy conversations is recognizing the resilience and creativity with which they have responded. The interviewees offered a wealth of hard-earned wisdom: strategies born from persistence and deep understanding of how to navigate spaces that were not built with them in mind. These strategies fall into thematic categories that reflect both internal and external adaptations: shifts in mindset, communication styles, and coalition-building approaches. Some are quiet, personal recalibrations, while others are collective practices aimed at reshaping harmful culture itself. The

following sections explore these strategies in greater detail, offering insight into how women have learned to influence outcomes in male-dominated policy environments.

The Power of Self-Belief

Much of the advice shared by women centered on one key principle: developing and projecting confidence. One lobbyist reflected on her journey to embracing this mindset: "I want to be taken seriously. I want to share what I know, what I've spent so much time becoming an expert in." For many, a lack of confidence was the most significant barrier to entering a conversation or overcoming interruptions. One interviewee told me, "Do not be talked out of how important, great, and wonderful you are. Do not lose confidence because of things in your external environment you can't control. If you're prepared and you've done your homework, speak." Another woman echoed, "Trust yourself, trust your instincts and what you know. Whatever room you're in, you are there for a reason."

Many encouraged action even in the face of doubt or fear: "Even though it might feel hard or scary, assert yourself regardless—even if you think you're the dumbest in the room. Women think so much before we speak… you're going to be right most of the time." One interviewee shared a strategy she had recently adopted: in meetings, especially larger ones, she makes sure to contribute within the first five minutes. "This establishes you as an active participant in the meeting and makes you more comfortable continuing the dialogue," she said. She found that sitting back for the initial part of a meeting made it harder to break the silence later: "Get your voice in the room from the start, and it will flow from there."

Several women pointed out the audacious confidence often exhibited by men, which often works to their advantage. "If we choose to have a level of confidence and audacity, nobody will question us," one woman noted. This is substantiated by research; across 64 study variations, women consistently rated their performance lower than men did, even when their actual results were similar or better (Exley & Kessler, 2022). Notably, the women who underestimated themselves were generally more accurate than the men who overestimated their abilities.

One woman humorously referenced a popular social media mantra: "Just have the blind confidence of an average white man." Though intended as a joke, it serves as a reminder that a bold sense of self-assurance, however unconventional, can sometimes make all the difference.

Speaking with Purpose

The differences in communication styles between men and women—whether rooted in society, biology, or a combination of both—are well-documented and cannot be overlooked. Many interviewees pointed out that men are often more direct and assertive in conversations and negotiations, which frequently works to their advantage. Research corroborates this, showing that men tend to use direct measures and straightforward commands, while women rely more on indirect measures or hints to get their way (Falbo, 1977). These behaviors are especially prevalent in mixed-sex interactions, where societal norms condition men to assert their intentions and women to prioritize compliance (Block, 1984; Falbo & Peplau, 1980).

Several women stressed the value of being direct and assertive to amplify voices and become successful in policy conversations. One interviewee remarked, “Women tend to think more before they speak, while men are more demanding by nature.” Another added, “If you watch men, they are very direct. I think we as women need to realize that if we choose to have a level of audacity, nobody will question us.” Studies confirm that women communicate more effectively with men when they make demands rather than requests (Dolinska & Dolinski, 2006).

This dynamic is significant in the high-stakes world of policymaking and lobbying, where conversations often center around the negotiation of money and resources. Many women agreed that men excel in these environments because they are unapologetic and bold in their asks. One interviewee put it: “Do not be afraid to be as pushy as the men are.” Across the board, interviewees urged young professionals to embrace direct communication, dropping excessive cushioning words, unnecessary apologies, and self-doubt when making their case.

For many, the concept of being demanding feels uncomfortable or even unnatural, particularly in male-dominated settings. However, there is no way around the fact that asking for what one needs is a critical step to being heard. “You’ll never get what you don’t ask for,” one woman reminded me. “Whether that’s for a raise, for respect, for money. If you never say anything, nobody’s ever going to do anything for you.”

Challenging the gender norms that discourage female directness is an important step for women who want to influence policy conversations. “We, women, aren’t great about being aggressive, demanding the same attention, standing up for ourselves… You just have to learn that skill,” one interviewee shared. “It’s about figuring out what you want, then unapologetically reaching for it.” Women, she noted, have long been adept at “managing up”—navigating systems that were not designed for them in mind. It is a skill borne out of necessity, but invaluable when it comes to self-advocacy.

Playing The Game

An unexpected but compelling theme that emerged from many interviews was the concept of strategically leveraging societal gender roles to navigate challenging environments. Historically, women in professional spaces have often taken on “mothering” or “secretary” roles—sometimes consciously, often subconsciously. These roles can include additional responsibilities unrelated to job descriptions, like tidying up, grabbing coffees, or acting as social nurturers in the workplace (Jang & George, 2020). While these behaviors are rooted in traditional gender expectations, they can also be leveraged as tools for influence and leadership.

Interviewees expressed mixed views on these roles. Some described the challenges of escaping the secretary stereotype. “In earlier days, overcoming the gender role of the secretary position made it really hard for me to be a part of the conversation,” one woman shared. Another cautioned against taking secretarial positions altogether, explaining how the role’s associations can be challenging to escape: “Even when I was promoted to a policy-oriented role, I still had to work as the secretary. I essentially had to do two jobs at once to get involved in the actual policy work.”

Yet, several others argued for embracing these roles strategically. “In a room full of men, I’ll ask myself, what advantages do I have? How can I use them in order to be heard?” one woman asked. Another woman from academia gave a particularly nuanced perspective: “We as women have privileges that give us opportunities to navigate a room in a way that men can’t. In the early 1900s, women who took on the ‘mothering’ role ended up in the room where things happened.” She added, “Ask yourself, how can I play into certain roles in ways that benefit me? How can I take advantage of these societal nuances? You need to realize that *this* is the game we are playing.”

This perspective is both pragmatic and empowering. Advocating for a more equitable system and using tools available to succeed within that system are not mutually exclusive. Acknowledging that the “game” may be inherently unfair does not have to mean giving up; it can mean finding ways to thrive within it. After all, life is not a game we can simply “tap out” of, so why not maximize every opportunity to succeed within it?

Reframing the “Mothering” Role

I am proud to be the daughter of a woman well-known in our hometown for her compassion, gentleness, and boundless patience. She spent a decade as a preschool teacher before managing a local restaurant, where I had the privilege of working alongside her during my teenage years. Watching her interactions with staff, many of whom came from less privileged backgrounds, left an indelible mark on me.

Other managers often joked about how she “babied” the staff; she spoke to them with patience and kindness, even in moments of frustration or conflict. She gave them rides home or to the train station, remembered birthdays, and made coffees without being asked. She listened to their stories, taking the time to learn about rough childhoods and foster care experiences. My mom treated her staff with a compassion that some had never encountered elsewhere. For many, she became a gentle and patient mother figure they had never known.

The impact of her leadership was unmistakable. Miscommunications eased, frustrations diminished, and trust flourished. It became clear that her staff deeply respected her, and their trust made the team more harmonious than ever.

While policymaking institutions are vastly different from restaurants, the takeaway remains the same. Women should not be obligated to take on “mothering” roles, but when embraced intentionally, these qualities can build trust and strengthen communication. Women are capable of being nurturing yet formidable, gentle yet strong.

I grew up watching my mom be all of these things at once. Now, I strive to carry her compassion and strength into every role I take on.

Walking the Fine Line

In social science, the “assertiveness penalty” refers to the phenomenon where men are praised for being assertive or direct while women are criticized for the same behaviors (Rudman & Glick, 2001). This double standard is especially pronounced in professional settings, where women must walk a fine line between being perceived as confident and being labeled as aggressive. Research examining the interplay of gender, assertiveness, and status has shown that

men who express anger or stand up for themselves are often seen as powerful or authoritative, while women are deemed "out of control" (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008).

This theme emerged repeatedly in conversations with interviewees, who reflected on difficulties balancing confidence with approachability. One academic highlighted the disproportionate scrutiny women face: "There's a much lower threshold for women to seem too aggressive—we see this with the rhetoric surrounding Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris."

The media coverage of these figures is revealing. Hillary Clinton was often criticized as "overly aggressive" by political opponents and the press (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). On a podcast with Cherie Blair, Clinton recounted how pitching an idea in the same way as her male counterparts often resulted in her being labeled "off-putting" while the men were seen as compelling and powerful (Stoecklein, 2023). "It's not just the typical assumptions about credit," she said. "It's about women—how we express ourselves, and whether we fit into the mental image of what a woman is supposed to be."

A similar dynamic played out during the 2020 vice-presidential debate when Kamala Harris drew attention for saying, "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking," after being repeatedly interrupted. She was mocked for this by political figures, the media, and even former President Donald Trump during her 2024 presidential run. This contrasts with a 2020 debate moment, when Joe Biden told Trump, "Will you shut up, man?"—a comment that elicited little critique.

The consequences of this double standard are amplified in policymaking, where success often hinges on perception. Politicians rely on favorable public opinion to win elections. Staffers and lobbyists depend on professional relationships and reputations to achieve policy outcomes. "In policy work, relations are central," one staffer from Congress explained. "If you're aggressive or difficult to work with, people simply won't come to you. A man can be much more aggressive before he hits that threshold." Another woman echoed this sentiment: "If you don't care about how you're perceived, sure, maybe you're freer of these societal burdens. But you'll get passed over for someone that everybody likes."

Understanding and navigating these dynamics, albeit unfair, can be vital for success. "You just have to know you're going to hit that threshold earlier—it's a navigation one has to make," said one congressional staffer whose work centers on appropriations and budget work. "I negotiate for a living, and having somebody see you as fair, but tough, but reasonable, but approachable is a very hard dance—which men don't have to do." She added, "Oftentimes, someone has to like you in order for you to get what you need from them."

Still, many women expressed optimism that this gap narrows with experience and authority. "As my rank has increased, so has my freedom to be more aggressive," shared one academic. "I can push harder now than when I could when I was an assistant professor."

While many women stressed the importance of navigating these unwritten rules, one academic offered a different perspective. When asked how she balances assertiveness with avoiding abrasiveness, her response was blunt: "Why do you care? That's the problem—to worry what they think about you." As one of her students, I admired this professor for being bold,

unapologetic, and wildly effective. Her words indicate this inner strength: “I don’t care what people think about me. And *there’s* my power.”

Strength in Solidarity

The importance of female inclusion and support networks in policy fields emerged as a common theme among participants, particularly those who had experienced female mentorship or worked in women-led environments. One woman in healthcare policy on the Hill described a sense of protection and solidarity within her team: “I feel very protected by my team, and I think the same goes for healthcare lobbyists—these women generally look out for one another.” Female-dominated teams, she noted, often foster a sense of camaraderie and mutual support.

Even in male-dominated sectors like financial services lobbying, the value of robust networks was unmistakable. “There’s an incredible group of women in the financial services lobbying side, and we all look out for each other. Getting yourself ingrained in these types of networks is helpful,” one lobbyist shared. Groups like the Women’s Congressional Policy Institute and the Bipartisan Women’s Caucus provide opportunities for women in policymaking roles to connect across party lines, while organizations like the National League of Women Lobbyists bring together advocates from diverse backgrounds. Beyond these formal networks, countless informal groups in DC help young professionals connect, grow professionally, and contribute meaningfully to policy discussions.

Participants across the board spoke about how daunting it is to walk into male-dominated rooms, let alone speak up and be heard. In those moments, the presence of allies—especially other women—can be transformative. “When you walk into some of these situations and see an ally, it helps. You have strength in numbers,” one interviewee said. Another woman described the critical role of female friendships in navigating the policy world: “You have to have friends in DC in order to get anything done.” Strong networks amplify women’s voices in spaces where they might otherwise go unheard.

Support networks are not just about inclusion but active amplification of women’s contributions. Many interviewees expressed deep gratitude for the women—and men—who have championed their success. “Management caring about this stuff is so important,” one woman explained. “I had a great male director who intentionally hired women to push us up, and he made a huge change: he gave me a network. Now I know other women in leadership, and that connection has made us stronger.”

Mentors also played a crucial role in advocating for women during critical moments. “I’m thankful to have had men and women as mentors who would speak up for me,” one participant reflected. “Even when I wasn’t brave enough to stand up for myself, I’ve always had a strong team that would.”

Perhaps the most touching reflection came from a woman who recounted the impact of her allies. “I’ve always had such strong champions and mentors,” she said, her voice emotional. “I guess it’s my turn to do the same for the next generation. Sitting here today, talking to you—this is my chance.”

Shifts Across Generations

Women across sectors expressed gratitude for the battles fought by older trailblazers who paved the way, as well as the younger generations who continue to challenge norms and foster meaningful dialogue. A banking lobbyist voiced her immense respect for the women now retiring, describing them as the ones who had it the hardest but laid the groundwork for what she and her peers could achieve: "Every decade that goes by, it gets easier and easier. Every older generation of lobbyists has paved the way for us." She noted that asserting oneself becomes more natural with age and experience: "It's intimidating, but not as intimidating as it used to be. That comes with age—I now know that I didn't know before."

Equally, women praised the boldness of younger generations, who continue to challenge systemic barriers and create shifts unimaginable in previous decades. When asked what advice she would give to young women striving to be heard, one interviewee responded simply: "I would start by saying thank you, and good job. You are changing a narrative that we have all lived in and accepted. By doing that, you've made it better for all of us. I can't thank you enough for that."

Intersectionality & Unheard Voices

While this study centers on gender dynamics in policy conversations, it is important to acknowledge that gender does not operate in isolation. The experiences of women in these spaces are also shaped by intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, and other socioeconomic factors. For instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights how Black women often face unique forms of discrimination that are not simply the sum of racism and sexism but are compounded in ways that create distinct challenges (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, research indicates that women of color may encounter additional barriers in leadership roles due to the interplay of racial and gender biases (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

While the scope of my interviews did not explicitly explore these intersections, it is important to recognize that the challenges and strategies discussed may not fully capture the experiences of all women, particularly those from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds. Future research should explore how these intersecting identities influence women's participation and voice in policy conversations.

A New Chapter for Women in Policy

At times, it feels almost ungrateful to dwell on the lingering disparities between men and women in policymaking. I enjoy freedoms today that my grandmothers and great-grandmothers could not have dreamed of: I vote freely and have watched a woman take the oath of office as Vice President; I have earned policy fellowships, interned in three congressional offices, and regularly sit in the hearings where history is made; I can choose to wear a skirt *or* pants to work on Capitol Hill—a simple privilege once unthinkable to the women who preceded me.

Yet, my conversations with women across policymaking, academia, and lobbying indicate that gender dynamics in policy conversations persist, greatly shaping whose voices carry weight. Societal norms and disruptive behaviors continue to exist across sectors, with their effects most pronounced in male-dominated spaces. While these challenges tend to lessen with

seniority, they remain barriers that undermine contributions and make it harder to ascend in the first place.

The most remarkable takeaway from this project is the resilience, ingenuity, and adaptability of women. Women are extraordinary strategists in navigating environments that have historically excluded them. They find ways to build confidence, make direct requests, and create networks of allies that amplify their collective voices and broaden their influence. The increasing presence of women in leadership roles has catalyzed change, while targeted mentorship has forged pathways for future generations.

Some women have learned to walk the tightrope—assertive but not aggressive, with voices both strong and well-received. Others have rejected this balancing act altogether, focusing instead on the quality of their work and ideas. Regardless of their approach, women have steadily challenged the structures that once limited their reach.

Progress is undeniable. Year by year, more women are joining decision-making tables, reshaping conversations, and normalizing what was once extraordinary. The challenges they face in policymaking today are far less formidable than those of the past. Women who lead—as Speakers of the House, Vice Presidents, presidential candidates—are redefining what power looks like and showing that progress is not a solitary achievement, but a collective endeavor. Each of us stands on the shoulders of those who came before.

Women today enjoy opportunities unmatched at any point in history. This is evident not only in the positions we hold and the conversations we shape but also in how we see ourselves. One interviewee told me, “Today, I don’t think a lot about being a woman. That’s a great thing in my book.” There is something evocative in that sentiment: the declaring of a quiet revolution, a reality where women speak without hesitation, move without constraint, and lead without question.

The journey continues, and progress has never felt more possible. This next chapter promises to be extraordinary. But today, I stand proud to be a woman—unremarkable in determining what I achieve, yet remarkable for all it represents.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you briefly tell me about your current role, what you do, and your career journey that led you to where you are?

2. In formal or informal conversations related to your job, do you ever feel sidelined or spoken over? Can you recall any specific instances?

3. In your experience, what factors shape whose voices are heard or carry weight in policy conversations? Do you think gender plays a big role in this?

4. Have you noticed any patterns in when you've felt your contributions are especially valued, or perhaps overlooked? For example, if more women are in the room, or if you're in a room with social scientists instead of engineers? If you're in a leading role in an event versus a participant?

5. Reflecting on your experiences across different stages of your career—school, internships, and then the professional career that led you to where you are now, how have conversations evolved? Have you noticed that you're treated differently, or your voice carries more weight, as you've moved "up the ladder"?

6. Do any particular moments stand out to you as learning opportunities in navigating conversations and making sure your voice is heard?

7. Public policy, particularly in DC, is a competitive environment. What advice would you give to young women seeking to participate more effectively in both formal and informal policy conversations?

8. Something I've talked a lot with others about is how women in politics often walk a fine line between coming off as assertive and abrasive. Unfortunately, I think this is a field where your success can heavily depend on perception, so I think many women are struggling to navigate the tension between being effective and avoiding negative stereotypes. What is your perception of this?

9. From your perspective, what shifts—whether personal, cultural, or institutional—would help create more inclusive and productive conversations in policy settings?