Women are less likely to consider themselves qualified for public office, less likely to express a willingness to run and less likely to be encouraged to run than men are. Yet, that doesn’t mean the public isn’t receptive to their running. Or, that women are unreceptive or unwilling to take on the activities associated with running for office. The opposite is true.

Women face hurdles that men usually don’t when they run for office. They have less money, fewer influential connections to run a campaign, media bias and primary responsibility for children and other family members.

Women’s progress in Charlotte-Mecklenburg has stalled. Fewer local women hold elected office today than two decades ago.

Politically in 2007, women held 16 percent of the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives (70 of 435) and an equal percentage of seats in the U.S. Senate (16 of 100). Among the states, less than a quarter of the statewide elected officials were women (24 percent, 76 of 315). Across North Carolina in the fall of 2005, women held 24 percent of city council, county commission and other local governing board positions (646 of 2,637), 16 percent of mayoral slots (90 of 546) and 25 percent of state legislative posts (39 of 170). The proportion of females in the state legislature was slightly better in 2007 at 26 percent (44 of 170), ranking North Carolina 18th among the states in women legislators. Women represented seven out of 50 members in the North Carolina Senate and 37 of 120 in the North Carolina House. The Women’s Summit advocates a one-year feasibility study to determine how a Women’s Political Leadership Institute could be developed. The institute would encourage and nurture the leadership involvement of girls and women and support existing grassroots organizations that focus on female leadership. The study would assess existing leadership development programs around the country—including ones that focus on increasing the participation of women in the political process—to determine what would be appropriate for Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the region. The study would also identify existing local volunteer efforts and potential partners, explore funding sources, and determine community need and support through surveys and focus group discussions.
In early 2008, women account for 55 percent of the registered voters, but reflect markedly lower proportions of public officeholders (except for the Mint Hill town board):

- 0 percent of the North Carolina Senate seats from Mecklenburg County, the most populous county in the state. (Women are faring much better on the House side, holding five of 10 seats from Mecklenburg.)
- 33 percent of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners (three of nine seats).
- 14 percent of Superior Court judgeships (one of seven).
- 31 percent of District Court judgeships (five of 16).
- 27 percent of the Charlotte City Council (three of 11 seats, a male mayor).
- 33 percent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board (three of nine).
- 20 percent of the Cornelius town board (one of five, a male mayor).
- 40 percent of the Davidson town board (two of five, a male mayor).
- 20 percent of the Huntersville town board (one of five, a female mayor).
- 33 percent of the Matthews town board (two of six, a male mayor).
- 50 percent of the Mint Hill town board (two of four, a male mayor).
- 25 percent of the Pineville town board (one of four, a male mayor).

As of January 2008, women hold approximately 46 percent of positions on county boards and commissions and 33 percent of such city appointees. Although the county proportion may seem more equitable, women are less likely to serve on key boards such as the Zoning Board of Adjustment, which has only a single female member. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Commission is 36 percent female (five of 14 members). Positions on civic boards are important because these organizations are often just as involved in setting public policy as local and state government. In early 2008, women are grossly underrepresented in many key civic and business positions in Charlotte-Mecklenburg:

- 19 percent of Charlotte Chamber Executive Committee (four of 21).
- 10 percent of Charlotte Chamber Board of Directors (14 of 70).
- 19 percent of the United Way of Central Carolinas Board of Directors (19 of 75).
- 15 percent of the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority (two of 13).

The Impact of Women

The value of having women in elected and appointed office is enormous. Women often bring different concerns to the table than men do, have different approaches to solving problems and provide more responsive constituent service than men, according to research by the North Carolina Center for Women in Public Service, a partnership between Peace College and the North Carolina Women’s Forum.

“Social issues including education, health care, violence against women and children and mental illness are considered more by policymaking bodies when women comprise a significant percentage of the body (Boxer, 1994; Dodson et al., 1995; Casey and Carroll, 1998),” the center notes.

“In approaching issues in general, a growing number of researchers argue that women approach issues differently and come up with more possible solutions, rather than fall into the ‘either-or’ dichotomous thinking employed by men (Thomas, 2003).”

In a nationwide survey of state legislators in 1988, the Center for the American Woman in Politics found that both female and male legislators overwhelmingly believed that women legislators had significantly impacted issues and problems that affect women as a group. That more than 80 percent of the female legislators shared this belief is not surprising. What is surprising: more than 70 percent of male legislators felt the same way. The study also found that majorities of both male and female legislators saw the influence of female legislators as much broader, influencing spending priorities in general.

Political Realities

The willingness of North Carolina voters to support women for public office was amply demonstrated in a 2004 study by Dr. David McLennan of Peace College in Raleigh. In a telephone survey of 600 likely voters from across the state, McLennan found:

- “A large majority of voters in North Carolina are favorably disposed to voting for women for elective office;”
- “Voters believe that women possess the skills and personal qualities necessary to be effective elected officials;”
- “The support for women candidates crosses gender, education levels and political party lines; and”
- “There are only slight differences in the support of women due to geographical differences.”

“The most significant reason why more women in North Carolina don’t hold elective office is that they don’t choose to become candidates,” according to the NC Center for Women in Public Service.

The center cites key reasons:

- “Women have different motivations for running for office—women tend to run when they want to make significant policy changes, while men run for the sake of competition, the desire to be in a position of power.”

“Women don’t consider themselves, in general as qualified to run for office as do men. Women report wanting to be completely knowledgeable about all the issues facing the policymaking body, while men report being comfortable ‘learning on the job.’” (Carroll, 1994; Lawless and Fox, 2006).

Women report not being as knowledgeable about campaign tactics and strategies as men (White House Project, 2004; Lawless and Fox, 2006).

“Women prefer a mentor to help them with all aspects of campaigning for and serving in elective office (White House Project, 2004; Lawless and Fox, 2006).”

“Six years ago, a renowned female family court judge in Charlotte-Mecklenburg told me that I had the potential to be an excellent judge. My whole perception of myself and my abilities changed. After winning a contested election, I am now the lead domestic judge in Mecklenburg County. You cannot overestimate the power women leaders have to bring more women into leadership positions.”

—Judge Becky Thorne Tin, Mecklenburg County District Court

Political scientists Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox studied data from a national Citizen Political Ambition Study, which surveyed more than 3,700 lawyers, business leaders and executives, educators and political activists—people who typically run for office. The study looked at self-perception and motivation regarding political office.

Lawless and Fox found that when women run for office, they perform as well as men but are underrepresented in politics. Regardless of age, partisan affiliation, income and profession, women are significantly less likely than men to express interest in seeking public office. Women also are significantly less likely than men to view themselves as qualified to run and to receive encouragement to run for office from party leaders, elected officials, and political activists as well as family, friends and coworkers. Yet, “women are almost equally receptive to thinking about running in the future, and they view the activities associated with campaigning at least as positively as do men,” the Lawless and Fox study reported.
“This gender gap in political ambition persists across generations,” Lawless said. “Despite cultural evolution and society’s changing attitudes toward women in politics, running for public office remains a much less attractive and feasible endeavor for women than men.”

Campaigning also offers special challenges for women, ranging from fewer resources and connections to media bias. “Women typically come into politics to solve a problem,” noted the National Women’s Political Caucus, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to increasing political participation and election of pro-choice women. “They come as moms, nurses and teachers. They don’t usually come with the same monied and influential networks that men do.”

The current campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama offers a case in point about media bias. “What worries me is that she is accused of ‘playing the gender card’ when citing the old boys’ club, while he is seen as unifying by citing civil rights confrontations,” remarked feminist leader Gloria Steinem in a New York Times column January 8, 2008.

**Why Is a Women’s Political Leadership Institute Needed?**

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, efforts to encourage, train and mentor girls and women for leadership roles in the community are not sustained. Some volunteer organizations, including political parties, provide such support on an ad-hoc basis or on a small scale as volunteer time and organizational resources permit.

Volunteer groups—such as the League of Women Voters, the Black Women’s Political Caucus, the Charlotte Women’s Political Caucus and the political parties—function as important grassroots organizations where women apply skills and give back to the community. While these organizations are an important part of civic life, they are volunteer driven and almost entirely composed of women who also meet the demands of work and family life. These demands are a major constraint on the amount of time and focus women can bring to an organization.

Given the size of the female leadership gap, such limited, patchy support will not ameliorate the problem. Only an organized, ongoing, high-profile training, mentoring and educational effort will raise the level of participation of girls and women in the political and policymaking leadership of Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the region.

For this reason, the Women’s Summit sees a nonpartisan Women’s Political Leadership Institute as special and as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do, as important as I do.

“My mentors inspired me to become a Junior Mentor for middle school girls. They helped and encouraged me in every thing I did. They made me feel special and important. So I thought, ‘If they can volunteer to make a girl feel as special and as important as I do, why can’t I do the same?’ Going from Average Crystall to Life-Inspiring Crystall... That is amazing.”

— Crystal Gabriel, 10th grader, Harding University High School

Projected roles for such an institute include:
- Encourage, train and mentor girls and women of Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the region to serve in elected and appointed leadership positions.
- Conduct campaign workshops for female candidates as well as those who aspire to be candidates.
- Bring together and support grassroots girls’ and women’s organizations that share the institute’s leadership goals, helping the all-volunteer groups to sustain their work and increase their effectiveness.
- Educate and motivate women to participate in leadership roles, especially the political process and help them acquire the skills necessary to become fully engaged.
- Promote equitable participation of women in politics, government, business and civic life by creating a talent bank of qualified candidates for appointment to boards and commissions.
- Empower girls and women to become engaged in leadership so that they can promote it within their families, neighborhoods and communities.
- Raise the level of discourse in the community and the effectiveness of organizations that play key roles in the community by having women equitably represented.