

# POLITICO



Alex Wong/Getty Images

## GLASS CEILING

# What Are the Biggest Problems Women Face Today?

Eleven female lawmakers, journalists and scholars weigh in.

By POLITICO MAGAZINE | March 08, 2019

**I**t's been a historic year for women. There are more serving in Congress than ever before, and a record number are currently running for president in 2020. But even with these significant gains, women—both in the U.S. and around the world—can still find gender equality elusive.

For International Women's Day this year, we asked some of the most interesting women we know—including several of those aforementioned lawmakers and presidential candidates—to tell us: What do you think is the biggest challenge facing women in the U.S. today? And what do you think is the biggest challenge facing women internationally today? Here's what they had to say.

\*\*\*

### **The lack of women in positions of power**

*Amy Klobuchar is a Democratic U.S. senator from Minnesota. She is running for president in 2020.*

One of the struggles that underlies all of our policy battles is the continued lack of women in positions of power. From corporate boardrooms, to the courts and political leadership around the world, the lack of women in senior positions continues to stymie progress on issues from pay to humanitarian aid to discrimination in all its forms. The sooner we understand that the lack of women in leadership roles holds back not only women, but all people, the sooner we will be able to advance society as a whole.

\*\*\*

### **Patriarchy**

*Keisha N. Blain teaches history at the University of Pittsburgh and currently serves as president of the African American Intellectual History Society. She is author of *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom (2018)* and co-editor of several books, including *To Turn The Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism (2019)*.*

The biggest challenge facing women in the United States today is patriarchy. This is especially evident in the realm of politics. Regardless of a woman's experience, education or abilities, the patriarchal nature of U.S. society fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. What patriarchy has done is convince people that a strong and intelligent woman represents a problem; a disruption to the social order rather than an integral part of it. Biased media coverage of women politicians—stories that focus

on women's fashion and looks at the expense of their ideas on policy—underscores this point. It is therefore no coincidence that the U.S. is completely out of step with the rest of the world when it comes to electing a woman as president. While women have maintained the highest office of leadership in Liberia, India, the United Kingdom, Dominica and many other nations across the globe, the same cannot be said for the United States.

From a global perspective, one of the biggest challenges facing women is educational inequality. Despite the many gains of modern feminist movements in the Americas, Africa, Asia and beyond, many still believe that women are less worthy of the same educational opportunities afforded to men. While there is no denying that poverty, geography and other factors contribute to huge disparities in education, patriarchy justifies this denial of opportunity. It feeds the message that men should wield the power and women should occupy a subordinate position in all areas of society. This outdated, yet persistent, point of view fuels educational inequality and a host of other disparities along the lines of gender on national and international levels.

\*\*\*

### **Not enough women at the table**

*Kamala Harris is a Democratic U.S. senator from California. She is running for president in 2020.*

I don't think it's possible to name just one challenge—from the economy to climate change to criminal justice reform to national security, all issues are women's issues—but I believe a key to tackling the challenges we face is ensuring women are at the table, making decisions. Something I've seen over and over again in my own career is that women in power bring a different perspective, an essential perspective. We made great strides in 2018, with an unprecedented number of women running for office, and over 100 women sworn in to the 116th Congress. But we still have a long way to go; the U.S. ranks 75th out of 193 countries in terms of women's representation in government. And, this is truly a global issue. If you're trying to tackle the world's problems, you should hear from half the world's population. So, we need to keep speaking up on behalf of every woman's right to be heard and realize her power. My mother used to tell my sister and me, "You may be the first, but make sure you aren't the last." I've never forgotten that.

\*\*\*

### **Sexism, racism and economic inequality**

*Rebecca Traister is a writer-at-large for New York magazine and The Cut.*

The extremely potent combination of sexism, racism and economic inequality—this may seem like too broad an answer but it pretty much covers it on both a domestic and global front. All of the individual challenges we may be tempted to rank are symptomatic of these massive systemic power imbalances, working in tandem.

\*\*\*

### **Trauma-centered feminism**

*Christina Hoff Sommers is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. She is the author of several books including Who Stole Feminism? and The War Against Boys. She co-hosts The Femsplainers. Follow her @Chsommers.*

The threat of harm is a human constant, but by any reasonable measure, American women are among the safest, freest, healthiest, most opportunity-rich women on Earth. In many ways, we are not just doing as well as men, we are surpassing them. But everywhere, especially on college campuses, young women are being taught that they are vulnerable, fragile and in imminent danger. A new trauma-centered feminism has taken hold. Its primary focus is not equality with men—but rather protection from them. This past June, the Reuters Foundation released a survey announcing that the U.S. was one of the top 10 most dangerous countries in the world for women—more dangerous than even Iran or North Korea. The study was ludicrously flawed and turned out to be a survey of “perceptions” of unnamed “experts.” But in the current environment of fear and panic, multiple news organizations reported the absurd findings. This new ethic of fear and fragility is poisonous and debilitating—but it’s gaining ground. American women should resist the urge to pretend the world is rigged against us when it is not.

The picture is different in the developing world. In countries like Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Cambodia and Egypt women are contending with practices such as honor killings, genital mutilation, acid burnings, child marriage and gender apartheid. However, there is good news. The number of educated women in these countries has reached critical mass and they are making their presence felt. Wajeha Al-Huwaider has been called the “Rosa Parks of Saudi Arabia.” In 2008, she created an international sensation by posting a video of herself driving a car. Until a few months ago, women were not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. Because of women like her, the laws are beginning to change. Dr. Hawa Abdi, a 71-year-old Somalian doctor and lawyer, is said to be “equal parts Mother Teresa and Rambo.” She founded a hospital and refugee camp in rural Somalia that offers a safe space to nearly 100,000 of the world’s most imperiled men, women and children. Under her leadership, the settlement is evolving into a model civil society. The challenges facing women in the

developing world are daunting. But for the first time in history, a formidable army of brave and resolute women is on the march.

\*\*\*

### **Access to equal opportunity**

*Ertharin Cousin is distinguished fellow of Global Food and Agriculture at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the former executive director of the United Nations World Food Program.*

As the former executive director of the World Food Program I was often humbled by women in conflict or crisis situations who, when asked about their needs, wanted nothing for themselves but asked that we educate their daughters. Education, these mothers believed, would provide their daughters with opportunities they, because of their gender, were denied. Unfortunately, even with adequate education, women here in the United States as well as women across much of the world still lack equal access to opportunity.

Despite decades of notable progress, at home and abroad, a reality in which opportunities are not defined by gender has yet to be universally achieved. Even more disconcerting, in too many places around the globe, women exercising or even seeking their basic rights is interpreted as a direct and destabilizing challenge to existing power structures. Some regimes are now trying to roll back the hard-won rights of women and girls. For this reason, today I join the voices of women leaders from around the world demanding governments, the private sector and civil society reinvigorate and reinvest in the policies as well as in the legal and social frameworks that will achieve worldwide gender equality and inclusion.

Here in the U.S. we recently elected a record number of new congressional representatives. In other parts of the world, political forces threaten to erode the progress that we have made at both the national level and through landmark global agendas. Whether these forces succeed will depend on whether women leaders and advocates of today and tomorrow, and all who stand with them, recognize the urgency and peril of inaction. Mothers and fathers whether in South Sudan or the South Side of Chicago, are doing their part to demand quality education for their daughters. It is up to women leaders and advocates, including the newly minted congressional leaders, many of whom benefit from past collective effort and stand upon the shoulders of so many, to push and hold wide open the doors of opportunity. Ensuring every woman and girl a possibility to lead life to her fullest potential.

\*\*\*

## **The lack of respect for caregiving**

*Anne-Marie Slaughter is president and CEO of New America.*

Women in the United States who are caregivers—for children, parents, spouses, siblings or extended family members—have two full-time jobs, while trying to compete with men who have one. And over half of us are the primary breadwinners in our households. The standard response is to persuade men to “help” more. But we need a sea-change, one that can happen only with a normative revolution around the value of care. We must come to see care work—the work of investing in others through physical care, teaching, coaching, mentoring, connecting, advising and navigating—as work that is every bit as hard, important and rewarding as the more individualist work that focuses us on investing in ourselves. We must value care monetarily, by paying far more for it through government and private investment, and socially, by raising the prestige of caregiving at home and care careers (which are among the fastest growing job categories and relatively automation proof). In other words, we must come to see traditional “women’s work” as truly equal to traditional “men’s work.”

Women in the world, particularly in developing and middle-income countries, face the far more elemental problem of still being considered property. Saudi Arabia’s system, for one, is open about this relationship, requiring women to get the permission of their male “guardian” to enroll in school, travel or take a job. But in many countries, women are still forced to be legally and socially subservient to men, with no means of gaining financial or social independence, much less equal agency. A global women’s movement must thus focus on creating legal and social conditions in which women and men have equal access to nutrition, health care, education, jobs and the ability to control their bodies and choose a mate. We will be making progress when parents around the world greet the birth of a girl with equal pleasure and expectation as the birth of a boy.

\*\*\*

## **Navigating career and motherhood**

*Margaret Hoover is the host of “Firing Line.”*

As a working mother of two young children, I believe that the big challenge facing working women is navigating career opportunities while maximizing motherhood. The good news is that economic and political freedom for American women of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds is the highest it’s ever been. Working moms do have the luxury of “leaning in”

to either their careers or motherhood, but rarely both at once. Enabling a mother to re-enter the workforce where she left off should be commonplace. But solving the “on-ramp problem” for talented women who choose to pause their careers to prioritize family life still eludes us.

The biggest challenge facing women internationally is the fundamental inequality of political and economic opportunity that the majority of women in the world face, but that Americans take for granted. A 21st century feminism should work to extend the human rights, political freedoms, economic opportunities enjoyed by women in the West to our sisters globally.

\*\*\*

### **Increasing rates of maternal mortality**

*Daina Ramey Berry is the Oliver H. Radkey Regents Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin and co-author of the forthcoming, A Black Women’s History of the United States (Beacon, 2020).*

One of the greatest challenges women in the U.S. and women throughout the world face today are increasing rates of maternal mortality. According to the World Health Organization, 830 women die every day from “preventable causes related to pregnancy.” These statistics are even more staggering in developing countries and among women of color in the United States. Black women in particular are the most affected, dying at a ratio of 25.1 deaths per 100,000. According to the Journal of Perinatal Education, the rates for black women did not improve between 1980 and 1990, and these rates are not much better today. Some believe such disparities occur because of a racially divided society in which black women experience higher levels of stress and marginalization causing many of their health concerns to go unrecognized. This leads to untimely and preventable deaths.

\*\*\*

### **A campaign to normalize misogyny**

*Neera Tanden is president of the Center for American Progress.*

The greatest challenge confronting women in America is a campaign to normalize misogyny and take women’s rights backward. It starts with a president who has a long track record of making disgusting and demeaning statements about women. Perhaps even worse, his administration has translated these attitudes into concrete action. For example, despite the rise of the MeToo movement, the Department of Education has actually introduced measures to provide greater protections for college students accused of committing sexual

harassment and assault by undermining Title IX. President Donald Trump has also hurt working women and their families by suspending a federal rule designed to close the gender pay gap, introduced significant restrictions on reproductive freedom, and threatened the future of *Roe v. Wade* by nominating Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

On the global front, perhaps the most important issue for the international community is empowering the voices of women. Right now, women and young girls everywhere face an immense range of challenges—from the inability to access food, education and employment to the threat of gender-based violence. Their perspectives and experiences must help shape our collective future. If we want to forge the best solutions for expanding peace and security moving forward, then we need to give smart, dynamic and strong women a seat at the decision-making table—both here at home and around the world.

\*\*\*

### **The economy is not working for women**

*Elizabeth Warren is a Democratic U.S. senator from Massachusetts. She is running for president in 2020.*

Women are the primary or joint breadwinners for a majority of American households. But right now, this economy and our government is not working for them and their families. Today, a woman earns 80 cents for every dollar a man earns, and the pay gap is even worse for black and Latina women. Wages are barely budging in this country but the cost of child care has gone up so much that it's now more expensive than in-state college tuition in most states—making it harder for women and men to work if they want to. Reproductive rights have been under relentless attack even though we know that access to safe abortion services is critical to the health and economic futures of millions of women.

These core economic issues are a huge burden on women and their families. More young women go to college than men, but unequal pay makes it harder for them to pay back student loans. More women are minimum-wage workers than men, but the minimum wage no longer keeps a mom and her baby out of poverty. I don't even want to think about how many women—and men—have been sidelined from a bright future because they couldn't find a decent child care option for their kid. We've got to make this economy work for women and families all across this country.