Why Don't Women Run for Office? Jennifer Lawless Explains
The United States likes to think of itself as a progressive, feminist country. However, when we think about who is making our laws, we see a disproportionate amount of (primarily white) men crafting all the rules. In a worldwide rankings of women in national legislature, the United States came in as a stunning #101.

What’s even more incredible is that the top three countries on the list were not from western nations: Rwanda, Bolivia, and Cuba (with 64%,
53%, and 49% respectively).

Nothing paints this problem more poignantly though than this pair of photographs.

Professor Jennifer Lawless came to the UMass Commonwealth Honors College Events Hall in November to provide insight onto why that may be.

A professor at American University and the director of the Women & Politics Institute, Lawless' work, which has been supported by the National Science Foundation, has been published in academic journals such as the American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, and Political Research Quarterly.

In addition, Lawless has published numerous books, including Running from Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned off to Politics, It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office, and It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don’t Run for Office.

So what is stopping women from running for office? After reviewing over ten thousand articles in 2010 and 2014, along with numerous other pieces of data, Lawless comes to the conclusion that it's not necessarily the harsh media coverage, like the general public believes it to be.

Because for every article about Senator Joni Ernst’s shoes, there was another article on former President Obama’s taupe suit. For every article about Secretary Clinton’s pantsuits, there was one on former Governor Chris Christie’s weight.

The issue is not with the media surrounding political campaigns, Professor Lawless tells the lecture attendees. The issue is rather with the media and society at large, and how women (both cisgender and transgender women, though in different ways) are conditioned over time to believe they need to climb a mountain, and then one more, in order to even be qualified to run for office.

"When asked what made someone qualified to run for office, women named very specific credentials, like a law degree or a business degree," Professor Lawless said. "Men mentioned more general traits, like passion and vision. Well, it’s a lot easier to have passion and vision than lots of advanced degrees. In addition, women held themselves up to a hypothetical bar — one that neither they nor anyone else could ever meet. Men compared themselves to the lowest common denominator or unqualified people they knew who already held office."

So, perhaps the gender gap is easier to mend than we thought. By no means will it change overnight, but the roadmap itself has changed.

Instead of the arduous task of completely eradicating sexism (in the media and ourselves), all we really need to do is start encouraging girls to run for office — and be sure to assert that we are one hundred percent serious when we do.

One of the ways UMass Amherst aims to do this is via their program, UMass Women into Leadership (UWIL).

UWIL selects twenty to twenty-five undergraduates from all majors each year, and through various activities prepares them for public leadership roles after graduation. In addition to mock interviews and salary negotiation training, UWIL students also go on fieldtrips to the Massachusetts State House and the New York State Capitol building, as well as offering a two-day workshop that allows students to engage with elected officials, alumni, and campus leadership.

"I was undecided [on my major] at the time, but something I am really passionate about is public service and working with people to get them the services that they need," Melissa Myers, UWIL class of ’16 said. "The great thing about UWIL is that it gives you resources, a supportive network of other women in college who are so encouraging and want to do public service or run for public office."
“For example, when I got back from being abroad, I emailed Michelle [Goncalves, UWIL founder and executive director] ‘my career path is shifting, I’m interested in more international work now, and I don’t know where to begin because I’ve never thought of it before,’ and she emailed me back right away and said, ‘Here’s three people you can contact, here’s their contact information.’”

(To learn more about applying to UWIL, click here).

Photography by Kimberly Mazejka.