

„Well behaved women seldom make history“

Report on the delegation trip to Columbus/Ohio and Washington D.C. as part of the project "Women in Local Leadership" of the "Deutschlandjahr USA"

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The women's movement in the US is booming: ranging from debates about #metoo to the „Womens Marches“, there are more politically interested and active women than there have been for a long time. Even in established parties the debates have arrived. One of them is how to bring more women in politics and political leadership position. In the US Congress, the proportion of women is currently 23.7% - which is not even one quarter, yet an all-time high. On a state level, the average share is 28.7% (of the state legislators) and 23 of the 100 biggest cities in the US are governed by women.

Our delegation consisted of two colleagues from the EAF Berlin and two laureates of the Helene-Weber-Award. Thus, visiting Columbus/Ohio and Washington D.C. for several days was an excellent opportunity for us to inform us on-site. The delegation was part of the „Deutschlandjahr“, which is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. Our project „Women in Local Leadership“ has a somehow special position, because there are hardly any projects with an explicit gender reference. Furthermore, it does not focus on the large centers, but promotes exchange with female local politicians from Ohio. The project partner in Ohio is the Association of the County Commissioners, or rather four active Commissioners from both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Our trip to Columbus included visits to the State House, a luncheon with female senators, the participation in the Parliament Day of a local chamber of commerce with a panel discussion on women in politics and their particular experiences. However, the focus was on a half-day symposium, followed by a diversity training session, organized jointly by the EAF Berlin and the Association of the County Commissioners under the leadership of Shannon Jones.

Around 60 participants were able to share their experiences: The obstacles and barriers are similar in both countries: The confidence in women is lower, women have fewer resources such as time and money, and powerful networks, role models and supporters are missing. However, when women manage to receive a leadership position, they are very successful and persuasive. Particularly impressive was the report of a recently elected female representative of the parliament who stood as a candidate three times without success, but was not discouraged by it. Currently, she heads the „Caucus for African-American People“ in the House of Representatives.

In addition, the concepts and instruments to encourage women, in all their diversity, to do politics and to take on leadership positions are similar in both countries and are based on empowerment. This approach includes the precise support of candidacies, training on leadership or mentoring programs. Admittedly, in Ohio (and generally in the US) these approaches barely exist at a regional or local level and especially cross-party programs are an exception. Therefore, there was great interest in the concept and experiences of [the Helene-Weber-College](#), which explicitly focuses on cross-party networking. Our conversation partners agreed on the importance of such institutionalized associations, especially among women, in order to overcome the existing polarizations and hardenings and to contribute to the renewal of the democratic institutions such as the political culture in the US.

However, there is a long way to go and in our conversations, the dividing topics between Democrats and Republicans (such as the views on Trump, on abortion law or on weapons ownership) were mostly left out. In return, there was more consensus on topics like maternity protection, parental leave and childcare. Concerning these topics, the situation is alarming: there are only four weeks of unpaid leave of absence and childcare is expensive and does not exist countrywide. The USA ranked last in a [UNICEF study](#) on family friendly policies in OECD and EU States. Another topic, which might be suitable for a cross-party alliance among women, is the fight against sexual harassment. In the US, this topic is much more a public debate than in Germany.

The current political initiatives for parity laws in Germany, which are legal requirements to oblige parties to nominate as many women as men, created huge interest. In order to overcome the persistent under-representation of women in the parliaments, reforms are necessary, which aim at changing structural factors and binding guidelines for the parties. The panel discussions organized by the German Embassy in Washington were a particularly interesting starting point in this regard. The current congress is more female and diverse than it has ever been before, which is mainly due to the Democrats – but there is still a lot to be done. That is why organizations such as *Fair Vote* or *Represent Women* stand up for reforms of the American electoral law, where the proportional representation including electoral lists is supposed to play a greater role in the future.

Finally, we visited the „Public Leadership Education Network“ (PLEN) that will soon celebrate its 40th anniversary. This was a special experience because the founding president of the EAF Berlin has always had excellent contacts to the American women’s movement and thus, the PLEN highly inspired the founding of the EAF Berlin.

In two years, so in 2021, the US celebrates 100 years of women’s suffrage. We are excited to see what debates and actions we can expect. Recalling a popular slogan of the Anglo-Saxon movement „Vote for women“: „Well behaved women seldom make history!“