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WOMEN RULE PODCAST

Female mayors want to blow up the term 'women's issues'

The leaders of Baltimore, Charlotte, and Salt Lake City say it diminishes critical policy areas.

By POLITICO STAFF | 07/19/2017 05:30 AM EDT



Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, Charlotte Mayor Jennifer Roberts and Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski talk to POLITICO editor Carrie Budoff Brown in the latest episode of the Women Rule podcast. | Reena Flores/POLITICO

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The mayors of Baltimore, Charlotte and Salt Lake City wrestle with some of the most contentious issues dominating national policy conversations, including health care and improving public school systems.

These city leaders also all happen to be female – and are tired of having some of their cities' most thorny issues singled out as “women’s issues.”

“I think we diminish the issues and we diminish our role when we have to always tie women to certain issues,” Mayor Jennifer Roberts of Charlotte, North Carolina told POLITICO editor Carrie Budoff Brown in the latest episode of the Women Rule podcast.

During a roundtable discussion in Miami Beach, Florida, Roberts and others criticized the framing of some policy topics – including education and reproductive care – as strictly “women’s issues.”

“Everybody cares about schools – just because more teachers are women doesn’t make it a women’s issue,” Roberts said. “And everybody cares about health care. And women’s health care.”

Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, who also joined in the Women Rule interview, added: “It’s not just our issue. It’s everybody’s issue.”

And Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski jumped in: “There is nothing about the work I’m doing that is women’s issues.”

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Underscoring that point, the trio of mayors also shared experiences leading communities after officer-involved shootings – a subject that all three cities have grappled with, including the aftershocks of sometimes violent protests.

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Roberts said she specifically sought out her fellow female mayors when asking for advice in dealing with the issue of police force.

“I reached out to some men as well,” the Charlotte mayor said. “But I knew that they wouldn’t understand how hard it is to walk that fine line between looking like you’re in charge, but also having to work with the police and the police chief and having to understand the community disruption, which had been building across the nation.”

In the wide-ranging roundtable discussion, the three city executives also discussed how the Trump administration has affected their ability to lead, and what the future holds for their political ambitions.

For more takeaways from the conversation with women mayors, read below:

3:05 Baltimore Mayor Catherine Pugh, the third consecutive black woman to lead the city, assesses the state Maryland politics and why women have featured prominently in the state’s political landscape in recent years.

“When women chose to lead in Baltimore, it’s okay because we’ve seen it,” Pugh says.

“There’s not a question of whether a woman can lead or does she have the capacity or can she galvanize supporters and can she be heard when she speaks -- because we’ve had a long history of women in position.”

4:16 Charlotte Mayor Jennifer Roberts discusses the disconnect in the conversations men and women leaders were having on education and the public school system in North Carolina.

Of participation in local schools, Roberts said, “it still is by and large the moms who are more involved than the dads.”

4:25 Roberts and Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski consider the benefits competitive sports and what athletes have taught them about politics.

“The fact that there are people saying bad things and trying to cut you down; it’s part of the game,” says Roberts, who played volleyball for the University of North Carolina. “You can’t take things personally. You can’t be depressed by things. You can’t worry about the opposition that gets personal. Because they get personal.”

9:30 The mayors stress the importance of interagency cooperation, especially at the local levels.

Pugh discusses how a bus ride with her city government’s department heads spurred collaboration, while Biskupski notes how Salt Lake City’s Public Works Department works with the Streets Department while also working with NGOs.

12:42 Does this group of local lady bosses have ambitions for higher office?

Baltimore’s Mayor Pugh says “I absolutely have none,” while Charlotte’s Mayor Roberts says “nothing is guaranteed” in politics.

14:15 The three women discuss dealing with prominent police-involved shootings and the backlash at the local level.

Pugh spoke about her own role – before her tenure as mayor – in the demonstrations following the death of Freddie Gray, and Biskupski revealed how her city’s police force learned to reward officers who deescalated situations rather than using their firepower.

19:46 The mayors discussed the impact of the 2016 election on local politics and what Hillary Clinton’s loss meant for women in public office.

“There was this vacuum of strong female leadership in my state,” Biskupski says of Utah. “So for Hillary to lose, that was just another ‘oh’ moment.”

But Biskupski, along with Roberts and Pugh, noted that the Trump administration meant that “we had to take the lead at the local level.”

Pugh added of working with federal agencies: “These are agencies that you need to figure out how do you get in, get what you need, get your congressional folks to focus in on what your needs are.

28:30 Pugh addressed the lack of female leadership even in spaces where women were supposed to be celebrated, pointing out the U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting in Miami Beach.

“I went to a workshop that’s being held here, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the Women’s Leadership Workshop,” the Baltimore mayor recalls. “I walk in the room and I peak in and I come back out and I said, ‘I thought this was a women’s leadership meeting.’ And so when I came back, they said, ‘Well, it is.’ I said, ‘But there’s a man speaking.’”

The mayors also with quibbled with the framing of some issues as “women’s issues.” Biskupski joins in: “Even the women’s organization at the U.S. Conference of Mayors highlighted their segment as women’s issues and there is nothing about the work I’m doing that is women’s issues.”

34:27 What advice would these mayors give to women considering careers in politics?

Salt Lake City’s Mayor Biskupski says not to delay plans: “You need to set an example for your own children or your siblings’ children or your friends’ children, that women should not wait. That the time is right, that there is never a perfect time.”

Charlotte’s Mayor Roberts agreed: “You do have to get started early...the guys get into it in their late 20’s, you know... We should be telling women they can do the same thing and if they’re just married, don’t have kids yet, they can have kids in office.”

Baltimore’s Mayor Pugh, who says she has already lost two elections in her lifetime, had these parting words: “If you lose, never be afraid to try it again.”

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