BRAMHALL'S WORLD



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Women's voices must be heard on policy

By Sharon Sewell-Fairman and Kai Rosenthal

A mother raising an autistic child stood up to address a crowd of more than 300 at Women Creating Change's State of NYC Women's Conference earlier this month. The experience she shared unfortunately isn't unique.

The end of the school day often brings challenges many families face: finding an after-school program equipped to meet her child's needs and her schedule. Without appropriate options, parents often must weigh leaving work early, sacrificing income, or piecing together care arrangements that leave the family and its finances stretched thin.

This mother wasn't simply describing a problem. She was identifying a policy gap that lawmakers have the power to address. Her experience should help inform how New York expands after-school programming, supports children with disabilities, and makes convenient, high-quality childcare accessible to working families.

As Election Day approaches, organizations like ours will be encouraging women to vote because doing so matters enormously. But democracy cannot begin and end at the ballot box. Women need an easier path to turn their experiences into action and elected officials willing to listen.

The very experiences that give women valuable insight into community needs also make it harder for them to participate in the democratic process. Research from Women Creating Change found that 21% of women cited caregiving or illness as reasons for not voting.

And women in lower-income households register, vote, and participate in civic life at lower rates than their peers. How can we expect a woman juggling full time work on top of caring responsibilities to find time to vote, let alone stay current on civic life in her community?

These findings reveal a fundamental contradiction: We depend on women to sustain families and communities, yet too often fail to create the conditions that allow them to shape the decisions affecting both.

New York has made important progress by expanding early voting and access to voting by mail. Yet meaningful participation requires more than the existence of options. It requires ensuring people can actually use them.

That means making workers aware of their rights to time off for voting and ensuring those protections are honored. It means considering reforms such as same-day voter registration so a missed deadline doesn't prevent an eligible New Yorker from participating. And it means examining how aligning NYC local elections with state and federal election cycles could affect participation.

We must also remove barriers to policymaking. New Yorkers should have opportunities to engage with politicians to ensure that the voices of caregivers and working parents are represented when policies affecting them are developed. This could include making public comment periods and public hearings more accessible and available in order that those governed have a stronger voice in shaping policies.

The mother who got up so bravely and spoke at our conference took the first step by sharing her story in a room full of leaders, but not everyone has that opportunity. We need to ensure these voices are heard. When women identify problems in their communities, elected officials should listen and explain what steps they will take, who is responsible and how residents can track progress.

The women of New York want their experiences, ideas and expertise to help shape what happens in their city and beyond.

Voting helps determine who makes decisions. Meaningful civic participation ensures the people affected by those decisions have a voice in how they are made.

Sewell-Fairman is president and CEO of Women Creating Change. Rosenthal is co-president of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York.