

CLOSING THE POLITICAL AMBITION GAP: Summary of the Lecture

Susannah Wellford, Founder of Running Start

Susannah Wellford's concerns about the lack of female role models in US politics led to her setting up Women under Forty Political Action Committee (WUF PAC) – a bipartisan political action committee that provided career advice and a small amount of financial support for women already running for office. However, it soon became apparent that women were not only failing to get elected, they weren't even putting themselves forward for office.

When questioned, women had preconceived ideas about the levels of discrimination that they would experience within the political field; there is a lack of self-belief and a sense that women will not be welcomed into the male-dominated world of politics. This led Susannah and her team at Running Start to look towards changing these preconceptions in High School and College students, to encourage them to stand.

All the skills required to be a politician, such as media training and fundraising expertise, can be learned. However, the world is still trying to determine what female leaders look like, having had centuries to come to terms with the concept of male leadership. Running Start aims to introduce female role models to allow young women to develop the notion of female leadership.

At Running Start camps, students are often paired with a roommate of a different political or ethnic background in the hope that they find common ground and understanding of issues. Politics is supposed to be about problem solving across parties to improve the lives of the people being governed.

Since the US election, many women have expressed a wish to run for office and it is hoped that there will be an upswing of female representation thanks to organisations like Running Start.

Belinda Phipps, Chair of the Fawcett Society

The UK experiences the same issues as the US in persuading women to stand for office and similar schemes to Running Start have been launched, such as Ask Her to Stand.

Despite having a female Prime Minister, women are deterred by the abhorrent behaviour directed at female politicians within the UK. Stereotypical behaviour patterns within Parliament require women to 'act like men' to be able to do their work. Role models can encourage women to stand for office but the system needs to be changed from within to make the political system more conducive for women politicians.