

## **The White House Project** by Marie C. Wilson

Time and again, I hear that we've made it. That equality has been reached, that the glass ceiling has been shattered, that nothing holds back women but themselves.

Sadly, the facts tell a different story.

While nearly half the law students nation wide are women, they make up only 22 percent of elected officials throughout the country. More American women are in politics than ever before, but they rank 57<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of percentage of political leadership. That's behind Botswana and Sierra Leone and tied with Andorra.

Despite the qualifications and opportunities now open to women in the political realm, women still face a distinct problem of perception. It remains difficult for Americans to see women as "natural" leaders; strong, decisive, and savvy are labels regularly reserved for men. Analyses of news reports reveal that all too often women's identities become firmly grounded in their appearance or a spouse's reputation. And for women of color plagued by the continuing effects of racism, the task is that much more difficult.

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) sums up the difficulties women face in earning credibility: "Our male counterparts can say whatever they want. It can make sense or not make sense. But women have to work much harder . . . For women, there is always that little built-in bit of insecurity about having to know every thing about every single thing."

A law degree, however, can tear down many of those obstacles. A J.D. confers a certain measure of authority, and, all jokes about lawyers aside, women attorneys often avoid the unfair but lingering stereotyping of teachers and community activists who run for office. A legal background remains a helpful springboard into political life.

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