



We Are Not Amused

By Ann Sullivan, President of Madison Services Group and head of Government Relations for Women Impacting Public Policy, the nation's largest women business owners policy group.

Those of us who are involved in advocating for the success of women-owned businesses are used to the challenges that come with running a successful business. Access to credit, complicated taxes, high healthcare costs, employing a talented workforce in a down economy – these challenges require strong women who are eternally optimistic. We are responsible for meeting a payroll and running a profitable business –no one else holds that responsibility for our businesses.

Women business owners follow economic news and economic policy. The changes we seek have to do with business. We leave the social debates to someone else. Although we certainly have opinions about social issues, we unite behind a business agenda and push for changes that affect the bottom line. A key element of being effective is being bipartisan or nonpartisan, if you include independents. The ability to work across party lines to achieve legislative results is a hallmark of women's business organizations, such as Women Impacting Public Policy and organizations that join together under a common policy umbrella.

This year, however, the climate changed for women in this country and, looking back, it has been in the works for some time. Gender bias is shockingly accepted in the media and political discussions in this country. If our daughters voice their opinions about their health, some in the media feel completely free to call them names. And then the apologies, which are certain to follow, say the comments were a poor attempt at humor. In politics, some suggest that women are incapable of making decisions about their health care while others in politics suggest that women should be making these decisions alone—without their partners. Gender bias, which we felt certain was at least a generation behind us, has crept into state legislature discussions under the guise of talking about reproductive choice.

It feels like everyone is talking about us but no one is talking to us.

There is simply nothing funny about trivializing women and telling them to sit down and shut up. And for those women who have chosen to take their families' economic well being into their own hands by running a business, this attitude is nothing short of distressing. But it may explain why women business owners have to make many attempts at finding financing for their businesses before finding operating or growth capital. It may explain why the government awards less than 5% of all of its contracts to women-owned businesses. It might explain why, until recently prohibited by law, our insurance rates were higher.

Almost as upsetting, is that the political parties are having a heyday at our expense. The partisan emails, from both parties, are trying to exploit this nasty name calling to garner our votes. This is an example of how vitriolic the partisanship has invaded the Nation's Capital and state legislatures. It is a by-product of the political atmosphere where anything is fair game. The breakdown in respect for differing opinions allows ignorance and bias to thrive.

But there is a way to fix this. We can start by electing more women to the U.S. House and Senate and in the State Capitals. We can insist that the media refrain from perpetuating gender bias, and we can refuse to support companies that sponsor those who perpetuate it.

We can band together in large coalitions to demand a stop to the insults without being beholden to any political party.

There is a direct connection between how society views women and the success of women business owners. Gender bias affects us at all levels—whether we are trying to secure a loan, buy a property, get a contract or buy insurance. How can women business owners expect to get a seat at the economic table if they aren't afforded the respect that they should come to expect?

It's time to speak up and it's time to get active.