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WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WOMAN IN WASHINGTON

Look around our town today and your eyes will land on example after example of some ladyboss *getting it done*. Forget Congress (where, ahem, a record number of female lawmakers were seated this year). Forget the pack of women gunning for the White House (who number five—five!). Women run our think tanks and our museums, our biggest defense contractors, our most illustrious spy agency, our tech companies, our newsrooms, and our lobbying outfits. To be a woman in Washington, in short, is to bob around at a new high-water mark for our gender—to be surrounded by a crowd of insanely powerful role models, heroes, and superstars. But let's be real: Behind every great woman there's another great woman (or 12). And when we wanted to know what it feels like to be female in our city right now, these were the people we set out to find—women who, by and large, live outside the headlines, whose diverse professional and personal choices and circumstances define what makes this a simultaneously thrilling, infuriating, fascinating, challenging, empowering place for any woman to call home. What's it like to sue your male partners for gender discrimination or to be rated on your looks? What's it like to run a presidential campaign or a construction site? To tie your tubes before you hit 35? Or carry a baby you know is going to die? In their own words, 62 women explain.



WHAT IT'S LIKE TO . . .

Argue at the Supreme Court

Melissa Sherry, a partner at Latham & Watkins and one of a small group of women who argue at the high court, remembers her first time in front of the justices.

“At the very end of my first argument—the case was about railroad discrimination in taxes—Justice Scalia asked a question. I launched into a long answer, and right when I got to the key point, the red light went on. My time was up. I looked up at the chief justice and asked, ‘May I finish?’

“He said, ‘You can finish your sentence.’

“Justice Scalia jumped in and said, ‘Well, you can use a lot of conjunctions.’

“Then the chief jumped back in and said, ‘Don’t you dare.’

“If you look at the transcripts, after that it says something like ‘laughter.’ That gave me an extra 30 seconds to figure out how I was going to fit a complicated thought into one sentence.

“There are lawyers who can think on their feet and go with the flow. I’m a much different model. I spend a lot of time preparing. I learned that from my first mentor at the firm. She had an intense process where she’d read the entire record and go over it and over it. She would have hundreds of questions. I tried to copy her and fairly quickly realized that you can follow what other people do, but you need to modify it to what works for you. The 24 hours leading up to argument are scary, but the second I get up there, there is such a feeling of exhilaration and adrenaline.”