

Nicola S. (Niki) Tsongas
U.S. Representative of Massachusetts (2007–2019)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“Set the Stage for Broader Change”

Representative Tsongas recalls an experience on the Armed Services Committee and explains how women Members can bring about change.

Interview recorded January 18, 2018

You'll be able to do things that you could never possibly do. So as women, as women look at, you know, different institutions, or different issues, and they so desperately want change, well, you have no better opportunity than by being elected to office. And even in the minority, even in the minority there's unique opportunities. So I, I gave the example of body armor where, you know, I asked a question about women's body armor, and learned that they never developed body armor for women. And that year, in that year's defense bill, we inserted a line—it was literally a line—tasking the services to begin to develop body armor. It's not easy because the materials, the materials don't easily lend themselves to shaping, and, and being protective at the same time. But, but it will never happen if you don't begin that effort. And there are modest changes that could, could take place, that make a woman safer as she's in the fight. But, that one bill led to change. That one line led to change. And I use that as an example all the time—that it isn't always that 100-page bill that leads to change, especially in the minority, you have to look for those individual modest things, but because you're at the federal level, you affect the entire country. And in the long run, you may set the stage for broader change than that. And, so it's a unique opportunity you have to affect change, but you have to, you know, earn your way into the institution, fight hard for it, and then serve well. But it's certainly worthy, certainly worthy of doing and I'm, I'm just grateful I had the chance.