Have You Come a Long Way, Baby?

Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in Campaign Coverage

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The 2008 U.S. presidential election was historic on many levels. The country elected its first African American president who narrowly defeated a female candidate in the Democrat primary race. The Republicans nominated their first woman as a vice presidential candidate. Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin demonstrated that women politicians have come a long way; however, an analysis of media coverage reveals that lingering sexism toward women candidates is still alive and well. The analysis indicates that there was a considerable amount of negative coverage of both candidates and that such coverage has potential to cast doubt on a woman’s suitability to be commander-in-chief or in the wings.

In commenting on Caroline Kennedy’s aborted campaign to be appointed U.S. Senator from New York, longtime Democrat consultant Bob Shrum observed that “Much of the criticism of Kennedy centered on her demeanor—her soft voice and use of the phrase ‘you know’—similar to the types of complaints that were so prevalent during the campaigns of Clinton and Palin”. Women candidates often experience what Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) described as a double bind: “Women who are considered feminine will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine . . . those who succeed in politics and public life will be scrutinized under a different lens from that applied to successful men”.

In Clinton and Palin, American voters saw two very different women candidates. Complaints among Clinton supporters about sexism during the primaries brought more derision than sympathy or outrage. But the candidate Sarah Palin dismissed the charges: “When I hear a statement . . . coming from a woman candidate, with any kind of perceived whine about that excess criticism or maybe a sharper microscope put on her—I think that doesn’t do us any good. Fair or unfair, it is there. I think that’s reality, and I think it’s a given . . . work harder, prove yourself to an even greater degree that you’re capable, that you’re going to be the best candidate.”

Despite their real differences, both women navigated presidential waters without a clear map for their desired destination through the glass ceiling. Both clung to stereotypical portrayals of women when it appeared to suit their needs, and both demanded that they be considered “candidates who happen to be women” rather than women candidates when sexism surfaced. Both, however, did experience overt sexism. Neither can justifiably claim that sexism was their undoing since both campaigns suffered serious flaws. Sexism, however, has haunted women candidates since Victoria Woodhull ran for president on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872 and was dubbed “the petticoat politician” by the New York Herald.

Gender Stereotypes

In her book, Men and Women of the Corporation (1977), Kanter identified four common stereotypes of professional women: seductress or sex object, mother, pet, and iron maiden. Sex object stereotypes refer to both sexuality and sex roles; thus, everything from clothing and appearance, being seen as a sex object, behaving or speaking in “feminine” ways, to being the victim of sexual harassment fit this category.

The mother stereotype cuts several directions. First, women are viewed as more caring and understanding—which can be an advantage. Women may be seen as being better able to understand the average voter’s plight as Susan J. Carroll from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers explained: “When voters want change, women tend to represent change. They represent something other than politics as usual” and voters see them as “more compassionate and as more likely to be honest”. The second application is less positive and occurs when a woman’s ability to perform a leadership role is questioned because of her maternal responsibilities. Also, the mother role causes women to “be identified with emotional matters”. Finally, the mother frame may involve images of scolding, punishment, or shrewish behavior.

The “pet” stereotype, or “child” as Julia Wood named it, manifests itself any time a woman is “symbolically taken along on group events as mascot—a cheerleader for shows of prowess”. According to Wood being seen as too weak, naive, or unprepared to handle a difficult task without a man’s help results in childlike treatment and diminishes a woman’s capacity to fulfill leadership functions.

The iron maiden image can result in loss of the advantages women candidates may have. Women who exhibit too many masculine traits are often ridiculed and lose trust because they are going against type or play into male political stereotypes that voters are rejecting. All four stereotypes of professional women surfaced to some degree in media portrayals of Clinton and Palin.

Gendered Media Coverage

Since stereotypical language as identified by Kanter and Wood is common in discussing or describing professional women, it is not surprising that it surfaces in media coverage of women candidates. In general, describing women in sexist terms reduces their credibility or may cause them to be seen as less human (Sutton, 1995). This is especially true when women are described using metaphors that draw on animals, children, or food. Animal terms focus on the appearance and sexuality of young women (foxy), and as women grow older, or are seen as too aggressive, they may be called barracuda, old bat, shrew, or cow (Nilsen, 1977). For example, Clare Booth Luce, who was elected to Congress in 1940, complained that the media portrayed her disagreements with other women as catfights” (Baird et al., 2008, p. 3).
Female candidates often receive less issue coverage than males, but more coverage on appearance, personality, and family (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Aday & Devitt, 2001; Aday & Devitt, 2001). When the media does talk about women’s issue positions, they tend to frame them as “feminine” issues such as health care rather than as “masculine” issues such as budget or employment. In 1984 Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman on a major party ticket, “was described as ‘feisty’ and ‘pushy but not threatening,’ and was asked if she knew how to bake blueberry muffins.

Objectifying Palin and Clinton

Nowhere was the contrast between Sarah Palin’s and Hillary Clinton’s coverage greater than in the category of sex object, with both portrayals sidestepping qualifications. Palin’s attractiveness resulted in frequent and varied references to her “sexiness.” Sextist portrayals of Palin stemmed from her beauty queen background, her youthful appearance, wardrobe, and her unabashed feminine nonverbal communication such as winking. Emphasis on her physical appearance began when news sources revealed she had participated in beauty pageants. The Washington Post reported that “Palin entered the Miss Wasilla beauty pageant and went, playing the flute for her talent. She went on to compete for Miss Alaska and was a runner up” (Quinn, 2008). Maureen Dowd of The New York Times often referred to Palin as a Barbie, calling her “Caribou Barbie” to emphasize her Alaskan and National Rifle Association (NRA) links. The objectification of Palin went so far as creation of a blow-up doll “complete with bursting cleavage and sexy business suit”. But it wasn’t just an adult novelty manufacturer who took advantage of Palin’s attractiveness. A Reuters image taken of her at a campaign rally exemplified the objectification. The photo was shot from behind and showed only Palin’s legs and black high heels; framed between her legs is a young male supporter. David Wright of ABC said that “Palin can seem like the young, trophy running mate”.

No one, however, doubted Hillary Clinton’s desire to appear powerful and that resulted in negative representations of her feminine side. Clinton was the antiseductress who reminded men of the affair gone bad and was “likened by national Public Radio’s political editor, Ken Rudin, to the demoniac, knife-wielding stalker played by Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction”. Clinton was the woman who simply wouldn’t go away. The seductress image had a different twist when Chris Matthews reminded us of another “seductress,” Monica Lewinsky, who enticed Clinton’s husband. Matthews attributed Clinton’s political success to being the victim of an unfairful husband: “The reason she’s a U.S. senator, the reason she’s a candidate for president, the reason she may be a front-runner is her husband messed around”. Matthews later apologized under media pressure.

Clinton’s mature image was a contrast to Palin’s youthful, feminine style. Both Clinton’s physical appearance and her choice of pantsuits over skirts and dresses were the source of considerable derision. An opinion article in The Oklahoman referenced her frequent wearing of dark pants suits to conceal her bottom-heavy figure.” Political cartoonist Nick Anderson created an animated cartoon which ran on the Houston Chronicle website featuring a curvaceous Clinton being asked, in the words of a popular song, “what you gonna do with all that junk? All that junk inside your trunk?” Without the accompanying drawing, one could have assumed that Anderson was referring personal baggage, but the cartoon made clear that he was also making a sly dig at her shape. Failure to see Clinton as stereotypically attractive was due to her choice of pants over skirts, but it was also a result of her age. After a photo of a tired-looking Clinton appeared in The Drudge Report, Rush Limbaugh opined that “as you age—and . . . you know women are hardest hit on this. . . America loses interest in you.” Thus, the question for voters became: “Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?” (Limbaugh, 2007). A Facebook group “Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich” had tens of thousands of members who ostensibly believed that a woman should be engaged in traditional sex roles. A man at a rally held up a sign: “Iron my shirt.”

Mother

As word of the Palin choice spread, some women said they were intrigued by what they saw as her unusual mix of last-frontier pioneer and suburban supermom. However, a career woman who has children—and who displays them so prominently—often invites questions about whether it is possible to juggle roles. Once the media’s initial infatuation with “supermom” ended, questions surfaced about Palin’s ability to be a good mother AND vice president. Palin’s special needs child prompted CNN’s John Roberts to argue that “Children with Down syndrome require an awful lot of attention. The role of Vice President, it seems to me, would take up an awful lot of her time, and it raises the issue of how much time will she have to dedicate to her newborn child? Thus, even if Palin had succeeded as mother and mayor or governor, that was no proof she could do it from the second highest office in the land. Comments were carefully constructed, however, to avoid seeming sexist. Reporters did not claim that it was impossible for women, generally, to work and have a career. Rather, they claimed Palin’s situation was a unique case because of a special needs child and because the position was not like any held previously by a woman. But questions of Palin’s ability to be a good mother came under even greater scrutiny when it was announced that her 17-year-old daughter was pregnant. Lost in all of the analysis was the presence of a father to share the responsibilities. When men run for office and have young children, it is immediately expected that there will be a “first” or “second” mom. “I think if you are going to be president of the United States, which she may well be, I think that’s going to be a real stretch for her.” (Quinn, 2008) However, Todd Palin’s role with the children was often dismissed—suggesting yet another stereotype.

As with sex object, there was a difference in the way the mother frame played with Clinton. She was portrayed with several negative mother stereotypes including CNN’s Jack Cafferty’s description of her as “a scolding mother, talking down to a child” The Wall Street Journal(WSJ) referred to her as “Ma Barker, saying she had tapped into the angst of blue-collar women who know they have to ignore their ’moping’ men and ’suck it up and hold the house together’” When it came to her daughter, Chelsea, Clinton faced criticism similar to that of Palin’s. She was
accused of exploiting her adult daughter, even though the use of children on the campaign trail is common. John McCain’s daughter had a blog about her campaign exploits, and Al Gore and John Kerry made use of their children as surrogates.

**Pets and Children**

While not as common as the sex object and mother frames, the “pet” and “child” characterizations also surfaced. McCain chose to campaign with Palin the first few weeks of the campaign because her novelty and instant popularity among the Republican base brought out crowds. If the captain of the team isn’t doing well, the cheerleader can offer something of interest. McCain’s strategy clearly fit Kanter’s (1977) definition of a pet as “a cheerleader for shows of prowess.” The strategy had a downside, however, of portraying Palin as needing protection from the press. “Alaska Governor Sarah Palin will spend much of the next few weeks campaigning with Senator John McCain, a move that not only capitalizes on the Republican enthusiasm for the vice presidential nominee but also limits her exposure to the news media.” Criticisms of McCain’s protectiveness were common and CNN’s Campbell Brown was the most vocal accuser: “Tonight, I call on the McCain campaign to stop treating Sarah Palin like she is a delicate flower that will wilt at any moment. This woman is from Alaska, for crying out loud. She is strong. She is tough. She is confident. And you claim she’s ready to be one heartbeat away from the presidency. If that is the case, then end this chauvinistic treatment of her now. Allow her to show her stuff. Allow her to face down those pesky reporters, just like Barack Obama did today, just like John McCain did today, just like Joe Biden has done on numerous occasions. Let her have a real news conference with real questions.”

Brown’s accusation was not unfounded as the McCain campaign refused to give journalists access to the candidate out of fear she would say something she should not—a fear that, unfortunately, proved valid after disastrous interviews with Charles Gibson and Katie Couric.

Hillary Clinton’s competence was seldom questioned by most Americans, and she had battle scars to prove she could meet with the media on their ground or hers. This did not make her immune from characterizations that she was a member of the weaker sex who needed a man to come to her aid. And Bill Clinton was more than happy to take “on the role of a spokesperson who is better able to explain her positions on hot issues like Iraq”. The former president told the media that “I can help to sell the domestic program.” He was described as “the master strategist behind the scenes. A second way that the child frame was attached to Clinton was when she showed emotion. In a debate when John Edwards and Barack Obama teamed up to bash her—she showed her anger, something male candidates (think McCain) do every debate, and was promptly accused of having a meltdown.

**Iron Maiden**

Portrayals of Hillary Clinton as weak or needing a man to carry her campaign were relatively rare. The common media frame for Clinton was that she was not feminine enough. An analysis of “the media’s negative attitudes about Clinton as a career-oriented woman” by media critic Ashleigh Crowther (2007) identified the following common terms to describe Clinton: “overly ambitious,” “calculating,” “cold,” “scary,” and “intimidating.” When Clinton nearly cried in New Hampshire when asked how she did it every day, the incident grabbed headlines and was reported as breaking news largely because it went against the tough image Clinton projected.

Projecting competence through demonstration of masculine traits such as toughness not only can result in crude humor but it is also the primary cause of the double bind. The double bind is most obvious when women need to go negative as Peggy Simpson of the Women’s Media Center (2008) noted: “Normally, a politician trying to check an opponent’s surge will go negative to alert voters to his flaws, to bring up his foibles, to say he’s not ready for prime time. It’s not clear that works for a female politician without doing more harm to her than to her opponent. But what is clear is that, so far, it’s not working for this woman [Clinton]”. Sarah Palin, on the other hand, did go negative and managed to get away with it better than Clinton. The main reason is explained by the dominant frames for Palin as sex object and mother that characterized her in highly feminine, less threatening. Conservatives such as Rush Limbaugh subtly suggested a contrast between the two women when he described Palin as “not shrill. . . . She’s not going to remind anybody of their ex-wife, she’s going to remind men, ‘Gee, I wish she was single’”

The iron maiden frame provided the clearest example of the double bind at work for both Clinton and Palin. While Clinton’s image came from not putting on a skirt—looking female—Palin’s femininity did not spare her criticism for doing her job and being tough. Analysis of the four stereotypes demonstrates that they work together and that some, such as mother or sex object, do provide some positives that can offset the more negative iron maiden image. However, achieving the delicate balance is difficult for any woman as these two very different women proved.

**Is There a Lesson?**

The sexist portrayals of Palin and Clinton and what they mean for the larger society and for future women office seekers was best summarized by Jen Nedeau (2008): Both women came from completely different political points of view. Both women presented themselves in completely opposite ways on the national political stage. But, both women experienced the wrath of a society seemingly afraid to see a woman in power. While there has been no lack of critique, analysis and conversation about how sexism played a role in both Senator Clinton and Governor Palin’s campaigns, one thing that has not been well-identified is the resolution of how society will proceed and one day elect a female commander-in-chief. There is no denial that both Palin and Clinton had strikes against them that contributed to their lack of success, but those strikes were unrelated to their being women. Palin was inexperienced and naive much as Dan Quayle was but no one made sexist comments about him and
related his lack of qualifications to sex role stereotypes. Hillary Clinton has long been a polarizing figure. Her competence could not overcome a considerable amount of personal and political baggage. Unfortunately, because she is “intimidating” to some and she chose a masculine leadership style to prove she could be commander-in-chief, she was seen as fair game for sexist attacks.

There is a residual belief among 25% of Americans in a recent survey that “Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women” and that among men and women with equal credentials 60% of the men and only 40% of the women think they are qualified to run for political office (Lawless, 2009, para. 4). Something is definitely amiss, and it is difficult to deny that the mainstream media finds it acceptable to be blatantly sexist and with few exceptions and suspensions of reporters, unapologetic. Further, media portrayals do send messages that women are not as competent and are unsuited to certain offices—whether they have the qualifications or not.