

# The Naked Truth: The Media's Role in Undermining Female Political Candidates

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## Abstract

Using academic journal articles, newspapers, debate footage, blogs, and nightly new excerpts, this study examines the inherent media bias in the political campaigns of contemporary female political figures in the United States. Secondly, the paper explores how the process of framing is used in the media to inhibit women's progress when they decided to run for public office. Finally, this research offers possible ways to overcome biased media coverage of female political figures and therefore, suggest ways to develop a more leveled and equitable political field for female candidates and politicians.

## Introduction

*The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctors says, It's a girl!*

The late Congresswoman and 1972 Presidential Candidate, Shirley Chisholm

The ascension of women to high profile political office has been the subject of countless scholarly research worldwide. Much of the cross-national research focuses on women serving in prestigious cabinet positions, national parliaments, state and local offices, as well as the role of First Ladies. Less attention has been given to women female heads of government, largely due to the lack of females occupying those positions. In the United States, no woman has occupied the White House in the capacity of President, to date. Moreover, the U.S. House of

Representatives currently comprise of 16.3 percent of women and the Senate comprises of 17 percent women (Center for American Women in Politics, *Congress Fast Facts*).

Over the last three decades, social scientists, political pundits, women advocacy groups, political consultants and bureaucratic analysts have spent countless hours researching and pontificating about reasons for the lack of gender parity in American politics. Several political, socioeconomic and cultural theories have been put forth that encompasses a wide range of reasons for the disparity between male and female representation in the United States. Among the reasons given are: 1) “Women are less interested in politics than men; 2). Women’s career choices and professional backgrounds are often incompatible with running for public office; 3). Women’s roles as wives, mothers and caretakers often delay their entrance into politics, therefore, narrowing the eligibility pool of female candidates; 4). Discrimination from political parties and the party establishment” (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers, 2011; 130). Smith and Fox (2001) hypothesize that women remain underrepresented in Congress because some voters have blatant prejudices against female politicians, while others cling to stereotypes about men and women politicians that favor men (205).

Once women overcome the aforementioned barriers and decide to run for public office, the media poses the greatest challenge to women competing effectively in the political arena. This work examines the media’s role in undermining female candidates and public figures when they enter into political life. Unlike past studies, this work incorporates academic journal articles, newspapers, debate footage, and nightly news excerpts to explore the inherent media bias in the political campaigns of contemporary female political figures in the United States.

While much has been written about the bias media serving as a systemic barrier to women to attaining political equality, very few studies have included media coverage of a First Lady, a female presidential candidate, a female vice presidential candidate, a female Speaker of the House, two female U.S. Senate candidates and female gubernatorial candidate, all in the same work. The current research includes the pre-presidential election coverage of First Lady

Michelle Obama and the media's coverage of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin on the national campaign trail in 2008. Further, this research explores coverage of former Speaker Nancy Pelosi's leadership and legislative success, and the more recent media coverage of the 2010 gubernatorial and Senate campaigns of Meg Whitman, Christine O'Donnell, and Linda McMahon. These examples suggest that the media has routinely failed to offer a balanced portrayal of female candidates and female politicians. The biased media coverage that often reinforces gender stereotypes often serves as a pivotal deterrent for aspiring female politicians.

### **Gender Representation in the Media**

Although women comprise over 50 percent of the U.S. population, men have long dominated the political arena. The male influence upon the political arena is still pervasive and evident in many of the most recent elections. Men comprise the majority candidates who run for public office, they are the majority consultants working behind the scenes, news reporters and anchors, political commentators and analysts, fundraisers, bloggers, political talk show hosts and guests, and chairs of state political parties (Carroll and Fox, 2006: 2). Thus, the nature and structure of electoral politics in the United States are highly gendered and are often broadcast through the lens and frames of the male reporters and journalists.

Carroll and Fox contend that "politics and elections are most often described in terms of analogies and metaphors drawn from the two most traditionally masculine domains in American society, war and sports" (2006: 2). These scholars substantiate their claim by pointing to words and phrases used by the media to describe campaign phenomena such as "political battles, war rooms, war chests, battle ground states, horse race, the final lap, a knockout punch, taking the gloves off, comeback, Hardball, and scoring a victory" (2006:2).

Such language poses serious consequences for female candidates. If political commentary is presented in language that promotes masculinity, women are often disadvantaged. Moreover, voters perceive women to possess feminine traits and they are, therefore, perceived to be more

moral, ethical, and honest than men. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) found that voters value masculine traits over feminine traits. The media exercises great influence in citizen's evaluation of political candidates. Given the fact that voters prefer masculine traits, female candidates are often disadvantaged when they are portrayed in the media in purely feminine roles.

### **Media Framing**

The expansive power of the media in politics is undeniable. The mass media has routinely demonstrated that it has the vast capacity to single-handedly destroy a candidate/campaign. Scholars Iyengar and Kinder (1987) attest to the power of the media when they observe that "the media serve as agenda setters, helping to determine which political events are newsworthy and which problems viewers regard as the nation's most serious" (4; Dolan et. al, 2011: 88). In short, the news tells its viewers what the issues are and how they should perceive them. With terms of political campaigns, the media identify for citizens important character traits and the merits on which to evaluate political candidates. Despite their best efforts, it is impossible for the news media to accurately report all the facts, all the time. Therefore, journalists often choose which issues or events receive coverage, at the expense of other issues that may also be equally or more important (Dolan, et. al, 2011: 88).

This choosing among various news stories by journalist allows them to "frame" issues. "Frames define the terms of debate; shape public opinion through the persuasive use of symbols; and, when most effective, lead to public policy change" . . . "Frames do not arrive organically; they are constructed and disseminated as a result of social and institutional interests" (Lewis and Reese, 2009:1).

Female public figures and political candidates are often framed in the stereotypical role as mothers, wives, and caretakers. They are often evaluated, by the media, on their appearances, style, marital status and the quality of care they provide their children. Men on the other hand, are more likely to be evaluated on the issues, their assertiveness and self-confidence (Burrell, 1994; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). This biased media approach and "gendered framing" of the

issues does not bode well for female public figures and candidates and often leads to discrimination that extends beyond their bid for elective office into the coverage they receive as elected officials.

### **Select Media Coverage of Michelle Obama**

During the pre-presidential election campaign of 2008, the media spent a great deal of time covering Michelle Obama's parenting abilities, her attire, and her favorite comfort food (Lowen, 2009). However, it was not until her controversial comments on February 18, 2008 at a campaign rally in Madison, Wisconsin, that many Americans began to take serious notice of Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama. During her speech, she stated that "For the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country" (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,331288,00.html#ixzz1MvX5vpGt>). Mrs. Obama received quite a bit of bad press for her unguarded comments. This controversy signaled an end to the honeymoon period for Michelle Obama and the press, and opened the door to sexist media coverage.

During the campaign, bloggers and journalist often used racial and sexual stereotypes in reference to Mrs. Obama. They "derided her as 'Mrs. Grievance, and Obama's 'baby mama.'" The *New Yorker Magazine* depicted her on its cover as a 1970's Angela Davis, complete with a monumental Afro, semi-automatic weapon and burning flag" (Williams, 2009).

As First Lady, the criticism, stereotypes and sexism continues. After the historic Inauguration of America's first African American president, much of the media buzz focused on Michelle Obama's fashion. On January 22, two days after the Inauguration, Serena French of the *New York Post* reports, "the glamorous new first lady---who was lauded on the campaign trail for her cutting-edge outfits---turned up at the inauguration in a matronly pea green dress and coat, then changed into a white wedding-cake topper gown for the multiple balls that followed" (French, 2009).

Another critic wrote, “at church yesterday she [Mrs. Obama] channeled Mamie Eisenhower in a ‘50s style housewifely dress. The black and green Chinoiserie print, with a three-quarter length sleeve and a full skirt, was created by New York designer Tracy Feith” (French, 2009). In the same article, Mrs. Obama’s style and appearance was compared to June Cleaver, a housewife from “Father’s Knows Best, and even Betty Crocker. Surprisingly, majority of Mrs. Obama fashion critics are women. First Lady Michelle Obama continues to make headlines with her appearance. Many of her critics argue that the First Lady should not go sleeveless or wear shorts. On September 8, 2009, NBC’s Matt Lauer devoted a segment of *The Today Show* to the mid-thigh level shorts that Mrs. Obama wore while on vacation in the Grand Canyon. The show’s title was “Pushing the Envelope? The First Lady in Shorts”. The topic of the segment centered around the question: “Are the shorts really disrespectful to the Office, or are they a prudent clothing choice in 106 degree weather”

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmCxcX3r6YI>)?

On January 24, 2009, AJ Hammer host of *CNN’s Showbiz Tonight*, with guests Lisa Bloom and Lauren Lake tackled the question of whether the media focuses too much on Michelle Obama’s style, and not enough on her substance. Attorney Lauren Lake conceded that the focus on fashion is part of being a public figure. However, Lisa Bloom, an attorney and anchor for the show *In Session*, argued that the media’s focus on fashion is totally unjustified. According to Bloom:

“Michelle Obama has always been the smartest one in the room. She was Salutatorian in her high school days, she skipped a grade- - - Princeton, Harvard. She was actually Barack Obama’s mentor at Sidley Austin, a very prestigious law firm, and all we talk about is who she’s wearing. We don’t talk about what’s she’s thinking, what her ideas are, what her vision is for the future. If we spent 1/10 of the time in the media talking about those things, we would be much more substantial people . . . “The media’s coverage is very retro when covering female celebrities. We are obsessed with baby bumps, botox, and who people are wearing, instead of what women’s ideas are. We see this with Michelle Obama and we see it with other female celebrities . . .” (*CNN’s Showbiz Tonight*, January 24, 2009).

When host AJ Hammer remarked “First Ladies have always been judged by what they wear, right?” Bloom responded:

“What we don’t hear about is who made Barack Obama’s tuxedo, who designed the beautiful tie he wore at his Inauguration, who made his shoes? We don’t hear anything about that. He is just as gorgeous and looks as terrific in clothes as she does. . . (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUoziO8FDVc>).

As with most First Ladies in the modern presidential era, as time has progressed, the media has begun to focus more on the important issues Mrs. Obama’s has championed as First Lady, such as childhood obesity, addressing the needs of military families, and education.

### **Select Media Coverage of Hillary Clinton**

On June 7, 2008, former First Lady and United States Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton suspended her historic presidential bid and conceded to her senatorial colleague, Barack Obama. During her twenty- nine minute and three second (29:03) concession speech, Hillary Clinton discussed being a female candidate in ways that she failed to do throughout her campaign. As a candidate, she often down played her gender and remarked “I am proud to be running as a woman, but I’m running because I believe that I’m the best candidate” (Milbank, 2008). However, during her concession speech, Clinton spoke passionately about what it meant to be running as a woman for president. She stated that “I am a woman, and, like millions of women, I know there are still barriers and biases out there, often unconscious, and I want to build an America that respects and embraces the potential of every last one of us” (Milbank, 2008). She talked about equal opportunities, equal pay, and equal rights. She discussed the suffragists who gathered in Seneca Falls in 1848, and the 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling as a result of her candidacy and her supporters. Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* wrote of Clinton’s speech “her words flowed with a force of conviction rarely seen on the campaign trail [during the many months prior]” (Milbank, 2008). After Clinton’s historic concession speech, many of Hillary’s supporters and political commentators wondered why she failed to show the same passion and conviction when speaking on the campaign trail. They wondered why she failed to fully

embrace her gender as a candidate. Perhaps, she wanted to be evaluated on her qualifications and merit and not on her gender.

As candidates, women are expected to appear tough, but yet feminine. Communications professor, Kathleen Hall Jamison (1995) calls this the “double-bind” or “Catch-22” for female candidates. If women come across as masculine, rigid or too serious, they are criticized and called “bitchy”. Moreover, if women come across as too feminine “she will be dismissed for lacking skills necessary to compete” in the political arena (Dolan, et. al, 2011: 144). Hillary’s campaign faced the “double-bind” dilemma and her advisers did their best to project her as a compassionate daughter, mother, and wife, while at the same time maintaining that she was “tough, experienced, and ready to lead” (Dolan, et. al, 2011: 146).

Despite their best efforts to project Hillary as warm yet tough and “ready to lead,” her advisers could not protect her from the venomous and often sexist media that covered her campaign. Media segments focused on her cleavage, T-shirts bore slogans that read “Iron my Shirt” and “Bros before Hos.” The “Hillary Nutcracker” designed during the campaign is “a device in which a pantsuit-clad Clinton doll opens her legs to reveal stainless steel thighs that [crack nuts]” (Cocco, 2008: 1). The “Hillary Nutcracker” continues to be an item for purchase at the popular consumer websites of Amazon.com and eBay.

Female radio personality Randi Rhodes called Hillary a “big f—in’ whore”, magician Penn Jillette referred to her as a “white bitch” on MSNBC’s show *Morning Joe*. The award-winning columnist and talk show personality Mike Barnicle described Hillary as “looking like everyone’s first wife standing outside a probate court,” while on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*. Tucker Carlson lamented on the same network and show that “when she [Hillary] comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs” (Cocco, 2008; Lloyd, 2008).



One of Hillary's most sexist criticisms came from the host of MSNBC's *Hardball*, Chris Matthews. On January 9, the day after the New Hampshire Primary, Chris Matthews appeared on *Morning Joe* and commented:

“Her [Hillary] appeal has always been about her mix of toughness and sympathy for her. Let's not forget, and I will be brutal that the reason she is a U.S. Senator, the reason she is a candidate for President, the reason she may be a front runner is because her husband messed around. That's how she got to be the Senator from New York, we keep forgetting that. She didn't win it on her merit; she won because everybody felt ‘My God, this woman stood up under humiliation, right?’ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zODHaIDfPXU>).

Hillary made her fair share of mistakes during her campaign. She made strategic mistakes and miscalculations, she misrepresented the truth a bit, and she may have underestimated America's desire for change, but with all of her mistakes, one thing that she could not have done differently was to be born a man. CBS Evening News anchor Katie Couric said of Clinton's presidential bid, “one of the greatest lessons of Hillary Clinton's campaign is the continued and accepted role of sexism in American life, particularly in the media . . . if Senator Obama had to confront the racist equivalent . . . the outrage would not be a footnote, it would be front page news” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N4M3TIsGM0&NR=1&feature=fvwp>).

### **Select Media Coverage of Sarah Palin**

Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin faced her fair share of challenges and criticism as a female political candidate in 2008. While Hillary's campaign struggled “to convince voters that she was likable; Palin's challenge was to convince voters that she was qualified for the job” (Dolan, Deckman and Swers, 2011). Palin's arrival onto the national scene was out of the ordinary. The relatively unknown, fairly newly elected Alaska Governor entered the national political arena, not with a long extensive resume of a political career on Capitol Hill like many of her predecessors. Instead, Palin had little experience in executive office, having served as Governor for two years and the mayor of Wasilla, AK, for six years, and she lacked experience in national security and foreign policy (Cooper and Bumiller, 2008). The media immediately

became consumed with Palin upon her arrival to the national stage. After all, she is the mother of five children, the youngest, who has Downs Syndrome and was a few months old at the time, and her teenage daughter was pregnant with no husband.

Many voters wondered how McCain could have picked Palin over the GOP's more experienced and more widely known pool of male talent who had far less visible "baggage". Despite the misgivings of some of the GOP faithful about McCain's choice of Palin, the *NY Times* headlines read on August 29, 2008: "Alaskan Is McCain's Choice; First Woman on GOP Ticket."

In one of her initial speeches, Palin commended Hillary's efforts stating "Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America, but it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all" (Cooper and Bumiller, 2009). Palin would soon find out that to completely shatter the glass ceiling would be much more difficult than she ever imagined.

Just as Hillary's campaign had to develop strategies to deal with what Jamieson calls the "double-bind" or "catch 22" that female candidates face, the McCain campaign also had to develop strategies that projected Palin as tough, yet compassionate. McCain advisers labeled her a "Maverick" and highlighted her courageous efforts to uncover ethical misconducts in state government while serving as mayor. They touted her toughness as a high school basketball player that earned her the nickname "Barracuda". The campaign also emphasized her feminine side as "a regular small town 'gal' rather than a polished politician, a mother, wife and someone who could finally shatter the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America" (Dolan, et. al, 2011: 152).

The media, on the other hand, was not so delicate in its depiction of Palin. Questions arose over her intelligence, her ability to lead, and her family values. Shortly after Palin's selection as McCain's vice presidential running mate, the media began speculating about

whether she was neglecting her family by seeking national office. The CEO of the National Coalition for Protection of Children and Families, Rick Schatz stated: "There is no replacement for a mother, and even with significant support, she will still need to take the lead responsibility with those children" (James, 20008). Questions about Palin's ability to balance motherhood and the demands of the office filled the airways throughout the tenure of the campaign. Ann Coulter, a right wing commentator, responded to the media's double standard on ABC News.com stating, "Having young children didn't prevent JFK, whom I hear is America's most beloved president, from being president" (James, 2008). Jane Swift, former Governor of Massachusetts from 2001-2003, pointed out that Mitt Romney, her gubernatorial successor and 2008 Republican presidential nominee, also has five children and no one questions his ability to balance work and family (James, 2008).

Throughout the campaign Palin experienced more and more sexism by the media. Bumper stickers were created that read "Hottest Governor, Coolest State." She was referred to as "a beauty queen, a dominatrix, a Christian Stepford wife, and a pinup queen" by a liberal columnist from *Salon* magazine (Cocco, 2009). Donny Deutsch, then host of CNBC's, *The Big Idea* could not contain his excitement for Palin and lamented during a live television interview on CNBC's *Squawk on the Street*, "I trust her. I want her watching my kids. I want her lying next to me in bed. That's the way people vote"(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTwaTRM0ZsI>). Such comments, while may be considered flattering truisms by some, also serve to undermine and delegitimize serious female political contenders.

Another instance of sexism and an example of a double- standard in the media with regards to Palin was the extensive coverage of the \$150,000 that the Republican National Committee (RNC) used to purchase clothes, cosmetics, hairstyling and other campaign accessories for Sarah Palin and her family during the campaign. While one commentator compared the expenditure to former Senator and Democratic presidential candidate, John Edwards's \$400 dollar haircut, few ever uttered a word about the amount of money that McCain

and/ or Obama spent on their custom suits. Cindy McCain, wife of presidential candidate John McCain, weighed in on the wardrobe conversation later in the campaign and responded:

“It [Palin’s wardrobe tab] was a very silly thing to be upset about, with all that is facing the country right now . . . We need to be concerned with what's going on with our economy, how we keep people in their homes and to make sure they can provide for their families . . . That's a great deal more important than clothing” (Sherman, *CNNPolitics*, 2008).

Despite Cindy McCain’s sage advice to the media to focus on the economy and issues, sensational stories of Palin continued. Some commentators argued that Palin brought a lot of the negative attention to herself. Her interviews with Katie Couric and Charlie Rose proved that she was an intellectual lightweight with regards to world affairs. The *Saturday Night Live* skits where she was portrayed as inept, that highlighted and exaggerated her inability to think on her feet, did not enhance her standing as a viable vice presidential candidate. Despite Palin’s unfamiliarity with significant concepts like the “Bush Doctrine” or her inability to name a magazine to which she subscribes or her casual familiarity with world geography, Palin’s historic selection as the Republican Party’s first female vice presidential candidate was a watershed and there was no excuse for the media to have crossed the line into unadulterated sexism in their coverage of her.

### **Select Media Coverage of Nancy Pelosi**

On January 4, 2007, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi was sworn in as America’s first female Speaker of the House, becoming one of the most powerful women in American history. In this position, Pelosi stood second in line to succeed the president in the event that the President and Vice President became unable to lead. During the momentous transformation of power from the Republican to the Democratic Party, with her six grandchildren at her side, Pelosi pounded the gavel to call the House to order stating . . . “This is a historic moment in Congress and a historic moment for the women in America” (ABC News, 2008 <http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/jan-2007-female-speaker-house-12493377>). Unlike

political candidates Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, Pelosi embraced her “first woman” title from the outset. She made no effort to downplay her gender, nor her achievements.

The position that she had assumed, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, was one of high prestige and immense power. As Speaker, Pelosi would serve as the “presiding officer of the House and see to it that bills move through the House” (Welch, et. al, 2008: 331). She could appoint and recommend chairs and rank-and-file members to key committees. In this leadership position, Pelosi would work with her colleagues to help set the legislative agenda, “negotiate compromises and put together legislative majorities” (332). Consequently, along with the title of Speaker of the House comes heightened responsibility, visibility and scrutiny.

Having been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1987, Pelosi had grown accustomed to sexist and misogynistic comments stated about her by the time she became Speaker. When asked about whether she believed sexism played a role in Hillary’s 2008 defeat, Pelosi stated that she did not have all the facts, but she does know sexism exists. She lamented “I’m a victim of sexism myself all the time, but I just think it goes with the territory . . . I myself find that I get a tremendous upside from being a woman and I don’t spend a lot of time worrying about sexist remarks that people make” (Sweet, 2008).

Luckily, Pelosi does not spend much time worrying about the sexist remarks made about her. There have been a multitude of misogynistic comments made about her by mainstream commentators. CNN’s Republican strategist Alex Castellanos commented . . . “If she [Pelosi] were capable of human facial expression, we would see that she would be embarrassed.” Popular conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh remarked of Pelosi . . . “She was shaking . . . Well that could be botox withdrawals”. Radio host Neal Boortz opined . . . “and how fun it is to watch that “hag” out there, twisting in the wind.” Pelosi was called the ‘Wicked Witch of the West’ by *Roll Call*’s executive editor, Mort Kondracke and was said to look like “Skeletor” by Fox News host Glen Beck. Rush Limbaugh leveled one of the most sexist remarks against Pelosi on his January 26, 2009 show. He states “but if she [Pelosi] wants fewer births, I have a

way to do this . . . put pictures of Pelosi in every cheap motel room in America today. . . That will keep birth rates down because . . . that picture will keep a lot of things down”

([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhd9\\_sqjHsI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhd9_sqjHsI)). Representative Peter DeFazio, Democrat from Oregon, disagreed with Pelosi over issues, but believed that she has been unfairly maligned because people are sexist against a woman Speaker.

Pelosi’s record of legislative accomplishments during her time as Speaker showed no indication that she was in the least bit concerned about the media’s portrayal of her. According to Congressional scholar, Norman Ornstein *Washington Post* article, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress . . . “was [in January 2010] on a path to become one of the most productive since the Great Society 89th Congress in 1965-66” (Ornstein, 2010). Under Pelosi’s leadership, the Democratic- controlled House achieved “record” legislative accomplishments that included: extending the statute of limitations for filing equal-pay lawsuits; an expansion of health coverage for children; \$787 billion stimulus bill; incentives to foster volunteer opportunities through service; a credit card bill of rights; healthcare reform; financial regulatory reform; and a lift of the ban on homosexuals openly serving in the military (*National Journal*, 2010).

The Democratic leadership in both the House and Senate worked hard to achieve such an impressive list of legislative accomplishments. The first female Speaker of the House of Representatives, though criticized and ridiculed by many, remained focused on the job at hand. Although many have questioned Pelosi’s political decisions, few have questioned her toughness and strength and her forthright willingness to confront and complete challenges. Pelosi’s legislative contributions, her fierce leadership and unshakable character will be celebrated (or vilified) for many years to come.

### **Sexism and the 2010 Elections**

The 2010 primary election cycle proved to be unprecedented for Republican women running for public office. Fourteen Republican women ran for the U.S. Senate, eleven more than in 2008, and ninety-four competed for House seats, forty-eight more than in the 2008 primary

cycle (Halloran, 2010). Potential factors that contributed to the increase in Republican women pursuing public office, according to NPR's Washington Correspondent Liz Halloran, was their "concerns about the economy, a pervasive anti-incumbent fervor, Tea Party activism, and/or the influence and example of Sarah Palin" (2010). Despite their motivation for running, their courageous efforts were greatly appreciated and celebrated by many supporters and leaders within in the Republican Party. However, their decisions to run for public office subjected these women to intense media scrutiny.

After the demeaning and derogatory, sexist, misogynistic comments that served to undermine political candidates Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in 2008, one would have expected that news outlets, radio hosts, political pundits and commentators would have exercised great caution when evaluating female candidates in 2010. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Instead, the 2010 mid-term elections produced what *AlterNet*'s Sarah Seltzer calls "a record number of Limbaugh-esque sexist attacks against women running for both parties—even two years after the media was called out on its vile treatment of Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign" (Seltzer, 2010). Democratic Pollster, Celinda Lake posited, during a press conference that 2010 "was a year we saw vitriolic sexism, and a year women didn't do so well" (Seltzer, 2010). Lake's observations were based on a study she conducted on effectiveness of sexist smears in campaigns. According to Lake, "support for the female candidate dropped 21 percent among voters who heard the sexist attacks, and just 10 percent among voters who heard policy criticism" (Hunt, 2010). Thus, the data showed that like all negative campaigning, sexist smears work on the electorate and has a damaging effect on female candidates.

Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization of Women, contends that "sexism deters women from running for office and sends a message to all women that they are not welcomed in the political arena" (ABC News, 2010). The 2010 mid-term elections was the first time since 1978 that women made no net gains in representation in Washington (Seltzer, 2010).

The former President and CEO of eBay, Meg Whitman, experienced first-hand the misogyny associated with women running for political office. The 2010 California gubernatorial candidate was called a “whore” by a male staffer of her opponent, former two-time governor Jerry Brown, when describing Whitman’s attempt to gain the endorsement of the Los Angeles Police Union. Brown was criticized for being insensitive towards women and for lack of leadership in his failure to immediately reprimand his staffer. The media’s coverage of the derogatory statements against Whitman were short lived and overshadowed by allegations that her former nanny and housekeeper of nine years was an illegal immigrant. This was particularly interesting to California voters and the Brown camp because Whitman publically campaigned for tougher sanctions against employers who hire illegal workers (Wolf, 2010).

Former World Wrestling Entertainment CEO and U.S. Senate candidate of Connecticut, Linda McMahon, did not escape sexist media coverage. Unlike other candidates, McMahon, because of her close association to what some have called the “racy, violent and misogynistic world of wrestling” was portrayed, not as a victim of sexism in the media, but a proponent of sexism. Joe Scarborough, co-host of MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* called her a misogynist <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjEBHcXOts8>. In his *New York Times* article “Female Candidate finds Tough Audience: Women” Raymond Hernandez writes about the sharp gender differences in the race between McMahon and her opponent, former Attorney General of Connecticut, Richard Blumenthal.

In a *CNN/ Time* poll conducted approximately a month before the general election, the Democratic candidate Blumenthal enjoyed a “nearly two-to-one advantage among female votes” (Hernandez, 2010). According to Hernandez, many women were troubled by “what they see as the harshness of the attacks Ms. McMahon has leveled at Mr. Blumenthal, the wall-to-wall advertising she is underwriting with tens of millions of dollars, and her role in the wrestling industry, with its cartoonish and demeaning depictions of women” (Hernandez, 2010). On the other hand, “men often praise[d] Ms. McMahon’s business acumen and some show up at her campaign events, eager to talk to her about wrestling and to be photographed with her” (Hernandez, 2010). Blumenthal’s campaign took advantage of female voters discomfort with



McMahon, and depicted him as an advocate for women's interests. He won the election despite his shameful lies and deceit about "his long tenure in government and his false claims to have served in Vietnam" (Hernandez, 2010). If elected, Linda McMahon would have been the first female U.S. Senator from the State of Connecticut.

One cannot help but wonder if whether Vince McMahon, Linda's husband, rather than Linda was the nominee, would he have been subjected to the same questions, scrutiny, and held to the same standards with regards to the brutally negative depiction of women in World Wrestling Entertainment? Would those same advertisements leveled against Blumenthal by Vince McMahon been considered "harsh and demeaning towards women"? If Vince McMahon had spent "nearly 50 million to Blumenthal's 6 million" in his bid for the Senate, could he have been the victor (Fritz, 2010)? One could never know the answers to these questions, because Vince McMahon was not the candidate, Linda McMahon was. One thing is certain, fewer people in the media, raised the issue to Jesse Ventura, former World Wrestling Federation professional wrestler, about how women were treated in professional wrestling when he ran for governor in Minnesota 1998.

Tea Party backed, U.S. Senate candidate of Delaware, Christine O'Donnell, received an enormous amount of media coverage. Like Palin, O'Donnell was not a part of the traditional Republican establishment. In the primary election, the Republican establishment supported former U.S. Representative and Delaware Governor Mike Castle. O'Donnell defeated Castle and faced Democrat Chris Coons in the general election. Karl Rove, former political adviser to President Bush and Republican strategist, commented on *Fox News* with Sean Hannity the night O'Donnell won the primary election. "She's been saying a lot of nutty things" . . . I met her. I wasn't frankly impressed by her abilities as a candidate". . . "One thing that O'Donnell is now going to have to answer in the general election that she didn't in the primary is her own checkered background" (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0910/42205.html>).

Given the lack of support O'Donnell received from some members of her Republican Party, it is not surprising that the media began to make comments about O'Donnell that crossed the line. Jay Leno on his nightly television show, made oral sex jokes about O'Donnell. The website *Gawker* published a post written by a 28 year old man entitled "I Had a One-Night Stand with Christine O'Donnell." Despite the article's title, no sex was involved, "the night ended with both parties falling asleep" (Pham, 2010). In a televised interview with CBN's David Brody, O'Donnell stated:

There's certainly a double standard . . . there's no doubt that they wouldn't say the things they're saying about me, they wouldn't do the things that they're doing if I weren't a woman. I'm not whining but there certainly is a double standard, especially when it comes to conservative woman (<http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2010/10/25/christine-odonnell-interview-with-the-brody-file.aspx>).

Throughout the campaign, O'Donnell struggled to be taken seriously in the media, largely due to her inconsistent and problematic platform. She made strange and unpopular public comments regarding, abortion, purity, masturbation and an admission to have dabbled with witch craft; she failed to provide clear and concise answers about her educational and employment history. O'Donnell believed that women serving in the military pose a threat to national security, and although she consistently campaigned on the use of the Constitution as a guiding principal, she lacked casual familiarity with the Constitution. Despite all of O'Donnell's perceived political shortcomings, National Organization for Women's President Terry O'Neill maintained that "O'Donnell did not deserve to be objectified" (Pham, 2010) Some of O'Donnell's critics disagree that sexism played any role in her campaign they argued that while there was "mocking and glib", the discussion of sex usually began with O'Donnell herself (Carmon, 2010).

Other examples of sexism in the 2010 mid-term elections include "reporters endorsing candidates for their "tight little butt", morning radio shock jocks talking about candidates' cup sizes, [and banging little body] and late night host David Letterman jokingly linking Nancy Pelosi to a real-life violent, sexual event" (Pham, 2010) Rush Limbaugh played "Ding-Dong, the

Witch is Dead” on his show to celebrate Pelosi’s departure as Speaker of the House (Seltzer, 2010). Joy Behar of ‘The View’ referred to Arizona U.S. Senate candidate and Tea Party supporter, Sharron Angle as a “bitch” several times (Ferraro, 2010). Carly Fiorina, Republican U.S. Senate candidate, crossed the line when she made an off-mic comment about her Democratic opponent Senator Barbara Boxer “God what is with that hair?” Joe Miller, U.S. Senate candidate of Alaska asked his opponent Senator Lisa Murkowski, “What’s the difference between selling out your party and the old profession” (Ferraro, 2010). Countless examples of sexism were uncovered during the 2010 mid-term election cycle, leading non-partisan feminist organizations to take action.

### **Taking Action Against Sexism**

Using the 2010 findings of Democratic pollster Celinda Lake that suggested that female candidate’s numbers increased when they confront sexist smears head-on and call the attacks “inappropriate, sexist, divisive rhetoric” (Hunt, 2010), the Women’s Campaign Forum and the Women’s Media Center, launched a “Name It, Change It” campaign. Its goal is to “ferret out examples of sexism aimed at women candidates and respond to them” (Hunt, 2010). This direct action approach to stamp out sexism could prove to be useful during the 2012 campaign season.

Another tactic used by women’s organizations to fight sexist commentary is their use of petitions and other forms of mobilization to unite citizens and demand that those who engage in the sexist rhetoric be suspended, demoted or fired. This tactic proved to be effective in 2008 when MSNBC’s Chris Matthews was demoted from the anchor of election coverage to a political commentator, over his woefully derogatory and sexist commentary during Hillary’s presidential race. Also during that year, the Women Media Center succeeded in their efforts to get MSNBC’s David Shuster suspended for his comments about Chelsea Clinton being ‘pimped out’ by the Clinton campaign (Walton, 2011). More recently, MSNBC heeded to the pressure from Women’s Media Center’s to suspend host Ed Schultz for calling conservative talk show host Laura Ingraham a “right-wing slut” and “talk slut” while on the air (Walton, 2011).

While some commentators are still finding it quite difficult to refrain from sexist rhetoric on the airways, others who have been “called out” for their actions and faced suspension or demotion have exercised greater caution when discussing women in their commentary. Thus, the efforts of women’s organization to confront and hold the media accountable for misogynistic views espoused on their networks is proving to be a major step in the right direction.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There is no denying that women have made substantial progress towards gender equality in America since the historic 1848 Seneca Falls Convention that ignited the women’s suffrage movement. Surprisingly, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women in America are still held to a different standard than their male counterparts. The examples provided in this work demonstrate just how different those standards are. The findings indicate that female public figures and political candidates are still evaluated based on their appearances, parenting skills, and other gender specific qualities, rather than competency and leadership skills. Female candidates often face a fickle electorate that expects them to be tough, yet compassionate, resulting in a “double-bind.” Further, the use of gender frames that portray women public figures and political candidates purely in the stereotypical role as mothers, wives, and caretakers, undermine their political success. Finally, American media outlets continue to demean and denigrate courageous women who seek leadership positions in policymaking institutions and executive offices.

This work’s major addition to the understanding of the role that the media plays in undermining female public figures is that it includes concrete and recent examples of the media’s coverage of the First Lady, the first female Speaker of the House, female presidential and vice presidential candidates, female congressional candidates and a female gubernatorial candidate. Further, this research includes the use of academic journal articles, newspapers, debate footage, and nightly new excerpts and blogs to examine the inherent media bias and sexism in its coverage of contemporary female political figures. The findings suggest that none of the women included in the research were exempt from sexism in the media.

A major shortcoming in this work is that there was no attempt by the researcher to randomly select footage, or to include examples that did not include sexism. The objective here was to find sexism, name it, in an effort to someday change it. Perhaps Gloria Steinem's *Statement on Equality* to those who report the news could be a starting point for that change. Steinem said, in part:

The most workable definition of equality for journalists is reversibility. Don't mention her young children unless you would also mention his, or describe her clothes unless you would describe his, or say she's shrill or attractive unless the same adjectives would be applied to a man. Don't say she's had facial surgery unless you say he dyes his hair or has hair plugs. Don't say she's just out of graduate school but he's a rising star. Don't say she has no professional training but he worked his way up. Don't ask her if she's running as a women's candidate unless you ask him if he's running as a men's candidate; ask both about the gender gap, the women's vote . . . (<http://www.nameitchangeit.org/blog/entry/statement-on-equality1>).

If journalists, political pundits, talk radio hosts, and bloggers of both genders would adopt and fully implement Steinem's *Statement of Equality* into their commentary, America would be well on its way to eradicating sexism in politics and political reporting.

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