

Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 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. Using common stereotypes of women in corporations developed by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, language theories, and media framing, this essay uncovers the common gendered stereotypes that surfaced in the 2008 campaign. 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.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes; Hillary Clinton; Sarah Palin; Sexism in the media; Women in politics; Women political candidates

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" (Kornblut, 2009, p. 2). Women

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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 . . . who succeed in politics and public life will be scrutinized under a different lens from that applied to successful men” (p. 16). In 2008 the double bind was not limited to Kennedy, as Shrum observed.

Hillary Clinton put 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling and Sarah Palin contributed to over 58 million more, but the ceiling awaits another historic election to complete the breakthrough. In Clinton and Palin, American voters saw two very different women candidates. When they came together—on “Saturday Night Live” in the forms of Tina Fey as Palin and Amy Poehler as Clinton—to address “the very ugly role that sexism is playing in this campaign,” Poehler’s Clinton described the issue as one that “I am frankly surprised to hear people suddenly care about” (*Saturday Night Live*, YouTube, 2008).

Complaints among Clinton supporters about sexism during the primaries brought more derision than sympathy or outrage. Even the real precandidate 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, women in politics, or women in general wanting to progress this country. . . . [F]air 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. (“Palin on How,” 2008, para. 2)

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* (Jost, 2008, p. 26).

Because 2008 was a landmark election year for women candidates, this essay examines the Clinton and Palin campaigns through the lens of sexist media portrayals. The analysis is informed by Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s and Julia T. Wood’s stereotypes of professional women, by research on the impact of sexist language, and by media framing. Lessons from the campaign provide the final piece of analysis.

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 (pp. 233–236). 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 candidates 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” (Jost, 2008, p. 1). 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. Next, the mother role causes women to “be identified with emotional matters. . . . Although the mother herself might not ever cry or engage in emotional outbursts” (Kanter, 1977, p. 234). Finally, the mother frame may involve images of scolding, punishment, or shrewish behavior.

The “pet” stereotype, or “child” as Julia Wood named it (1994, pp. 264–265), manifests itself any time a woman is “symbolically taken along on group events as mascot—a cheerleader for shows of prowess” (Kanter, 1977, p. 235). According to Wood being seen as too weak, naïve, 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 (pp. 264–265).

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

Media framing was defined by Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw (2004) as “that focus on *how* issues and other objects of interest are reported by news media as well as *what* is emphasized in such reporting” (p. 257, *emphasis in original*). Language choice is a key component in establishing frames. 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).

Cameron (1992) argued that as a culture we have developed certain linguistic social recognitions of respect and status such as “sir,” “mister,” “senator,” or

“doctor.” Women are often stripped of this sort of recognition and respect when strangers, acquaintances, subordinates, or media commentators call them by their first names but don’t do the same for males. Women candidates, however, often contribute to the problem by using only their first names in campaign literature. Language choice reinforces gender stereotypes and may go so far as to affect the outcome of the election with male candidates being seen as more viable (Bystrom, 2006; Kahn, 1992).

Research on media coverage of male and female candidates demonstrates important differences in coverage based on gender that go beyond sexist language or stereotypical portrayals. Differences between male and female candidates in the quantity (Kahn, 1994; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991), quality (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Banwart, Bystrom, & Robertson, 2003; Devitt, 2002), and negativity (Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005; Kahn, 1994; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991) of coverage can all erode a woman candidate’s credibility.

Female candidates often receive less issue coverage than males, but more coverage on appearance, personality, and family (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Bystrom, 2006; Devitt, 2002; Heldman et al., 2005; Kahn, 1994; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). 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. During general election campaigns, male candidates received more coverage on feminine issues than they did in the primary; this trend may make it difficult for voters to associate female candidates with any issue while increasing the association of both masculine and feminine issues with male candidates (Banwart et al., 2003).

Before Hillary Clinton’s bid for the Democratic nomination, Elizabeth Dole was the first serious female candidate for a major party presidential nomination. Research on her campaign showed that voters were more likely to learn about her appearance or character than her issue positions, and many stories were negative (Aday & Devitt, 2001). Her role as Bob Dole’s wife was mentioned in a significant number of stories and was usually mentioned in the first third of the story. Overall references to her family outpaced those for her opponents (Heldman et al., 2005). Dole was not alone in being portrayed stereotypically. 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. . . . When she stood before the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, anchor Tom Brokaw announced: ‘Geraldine Ferraro . . . The first woman to be nominated for vice president . . . Size 6!’” (Baird et al., 2008, p. 1).

Studies of women candidates for other offices produced similar findings with emphasis on gender stereotypes such as appearance, clothes, size, and emotional state (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Banwart et al., 2003; Bystrom, 2006; Heldman et al., 2005; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991). Stories are also more likely to mention children and marital status and to define candidates in terms of these roles rather than as a political candidate (Banwart et al., 2003; Bystrom, 2006; Fox, 1997; Heldman et al., 2005). Research on Congressional races indicates that female candidates are often taken less seriously at the beginning of a campaign and are referred to by their first names while their male opponents are called “mister” (Fox, 1997).

Analysis of Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign for the Democrat nomination for president and Governor Sarah Palin's campaign for vice president reveals that media coverage incorporated gender stereotypes and gendered language that influenced the way both women were viewed.

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"; whereas, Clinton was viewed as not feminine enough in pantsuits that covered her "cankles" (thick ankles).

Sexist 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 won, playing the flute for her talent. She went on to compete for Miss Alaska and was a runner up" (Goldstein & Shear, 2008, para. 16). *The Post* interviewed former Miss America Kate Shindle, who described Palin's "cheerful aggressiveness" as "part cheerleader, part news anchor and part drill sergeant" (Copeland, 2008, para. 29).

Palin's pageant past was used to dismiss her as a serious candidate. Becky O'Malley (2008) writing in the *Berkeley Daily Planet* editorialized that McCain's "choice of an essentially inexperienced ex-beauty queen to be a heartbeat away from a 72-year-old cancer survivor was bad enough" (para. 6) and "The race for the U.S. presidency is not just one more beauty contest" (para. 20). Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* often referred to Palin as a Barbie, calling her "Caribou Barbie" (Dowd, 2008f, para. 28) to emphasize her Alaskan and National Rifle Association (NRA) links and "Valentino Barbie" when the Republican National Committee's \$150,000 shopping spree was revealed (Dowd, 2008g, para. 2). When discussing the vice presidential debate, a *Daily News* article reported, "Former beauty pageant contestant Palin is a head-turner who offers ample opportunities for trouble to a man who expresses appreciation for attractive women in ways that overstep the bounds of political correctness" (McAuliff, 2008, para. 10). While the statement also reflected negatively on Joe Biden, it suggested that the major threat Palin posed to Biden in the debate was due to her appearance not her rebuttals.

The objectification of Palin went so far as creation of a blow-up doll "complete with bursting cleavage and sexy business suit" that included instructions to "blow her up and show her how you are going to vote. Let her pound your gavel over and over. . . . This blow-up sex doll could really satisfy all those swing voters" (Wheatley, 2008, para. 1-4).

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 (Sheppard, 2008).

While some sources were obsessed with publishing or discussing Palin's photos, others were content to comment on her attractiveness. David Wright of *ABC* said that "Palin can seem like the young, trophy running mate" (Blatt, 2008, para. 11). Donny Deutsch (2008) of *CNBC* explained the fascination with her "sexy" appearance: "Men want a sexy woman. Women want to idealize about a sexy woman. . . . Women want to be her; men want to mate with her" (Deutsch, 2008, para. 3). Not all women wanted to be Palin or vote for her, however, causing Bill Bennett to chastise less feminine women when he argued that "liberal feminists" disliked Palin because "she's very attractive" (Bennett, 2008, para. 2).

Discussion of Palin's fashion choices stands as an excellent example of why emphasis on women as sex objects deflects discussion of qualities related to political office. Robin Givhan's (2008) article in *The Washington Post* covering everything from Palin's hair to her "peep-toe pump" concluded that "Palin seems to dress for pretty rather than powerful" (para. 14). But pretty only went so far when it was time to talk politics and to demonstrate power as we reveal in the section on "pets" and "child" images.

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*" (Stephen, 2008, para. 2). 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 unfaithful 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 as cited in Boehlert & Foser, 2008, para 1). 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. (Heimer, 2007, para. 7)

And it was not just male members of the media who commented on Clinton's figure or her sexuality. *The Washington Post's* Robin Givhan wrote a widely quoted article that began, "There was cleavage on display Wednesday afternoon on C-SPAN2.

It belonged to Senator Hillary Clinton” (Givhan, 2007). Givhan went on to explain that “There wasn’t an unseemly amount of cleavage showing, but there it was. Undeniable. It was startling to see that small acknowledgment of sexuality and femininity peeking out of the conservative—aesthetically speaking—environment of Congress” (Givhan, 2007, para. 2). So rather than being seen as attractive the way Palin’s short skirts and tight jackets were, Clinton’s feminine dress was seen as out of place in the halls of Congress. For Clinton, a clear double bind existed.

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, para. 2).

Sexist attacks on Clinton were frequently off-color or rude. A 527 organization was created by Republican Roger Stone and was called, “Citizens United Not Timid.” 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.” And then there was what Amanda Fortini in *New York Magazine* called “the truly horrible YouTube video of a KFC bucket that reads HILLARY MEAL DEAL: 2 FAT THIGHS, 2 SMALL BREASTS, AND A BUNCH OF LEFT WINGS” (Fortini, 2008, para. 2).

While the objectification of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton took very different paths, the fact that it existed is noteworthy. Kanter wrote her book 32 years ago, but what changed was that the objectification was not taking place behind corporate doors but in full view of the American public.

Mother

Our culture is still at odds with a second stereotype that has potential to elevate women’s political standing but also poses pitfalls. When John McCain introduced Sarah Palin in Dayton, Ohio, he referred to her as “a devoted wife and a mother of five” (McCain, 2008a, para. 20), and numerous news sources featured that fact. One *Los Angeles Times* article was titled “She’s no good ol’ boy; Meet Sarah Palin: governor, mother of five, hunter, reformer, creationist, runner-up to Miss Alaska,” insinuating mother was the second most relevant fact about the candidate (Decker & Finnagen, 2008). The authors described her as “the tableau of everyday mom-ness” (para. 3). The *LA Times* was far from alone in this characterization. A *Daily News* article called her a “spunky mom” (Lupica, 2008, para. 2), and *The Washington Times* reported that she was “a 44-year-old mother of five” (“Sarah Palin, Conservative,” 2008, para. 2). What is notable is not simply that being a mother was mentioned, but that it was prominently and repeatedly included in news stories. An article appearing in *The New York Times* exemplifies this trend:

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.

She is a . . . self-described hockey mom and PTA member. She has five children, the oldest a teenager in the Army who will leave for Iraq in September, and the youngest a 4-month-old with Down syndrome. (Calmes, 2008, para. 23)

Because voters were thinking of her as a mother, the media justified its focus.

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?" (Bozel, 2008, para. 6). Bill Weir of *ABC's Good Morning America* asked a similar question of a McCain spokesperson: "Adding to the brutality of a national campaign, the Palin family also has an infant with special needs. What leads you, the Senator, and the Governor to believe that one won't affect the other in the next couple of months?" (Bozel, para. 7).

Media analysts were not alone in questioning Palin's suitability to lead and to mother. Ordinary citizens were interviewed, and *The New York Times* provided these reactions:

You can juggle a BlackBerry and a breast pump in a lot of jobs, but not in the vice presidency," said Christina Henry de Tesson, a mother of two in Portland, Ore., who supports Mr. Obama.

Her thoughts were echoed by some Republicans, including Anne Faircloth, daughter of former Senator Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina. Being a governor is one thing, Ms. Faircloth said, and Ms. Palin's husband, Todd, seems like a supportive spouse. "But running for the second-highest office in the land is a very different kettle of fish," she said. (Kantor & Swarns, 2008, para. 11–12)

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.

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. As *The New York Times* stated: "With five children, including an infant with Down syndrome and, as the country learned Monday, a pregnant 17-year-old, Ms. Palin has set off a fierce argument among women about whether there are enough hours in the day for her to take on the vice presidency, and whether she is right to try" (Kantor & Swarns, 2008, para. 2).

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. However, Todd Palin's role with the children was often dismissed—suggesting yet another stereotype.

Many commentators acknowledged he could help but claimed he could not do it without her. Sally Quinn, writer for *The Washington Post*, made such a claim in a CNN interview:

... everyone knows that women and men are different and that moms and dads are different and that women—the burden of child care almost always falls on the woman... when you have five children, one a 4-month-old Down syndrome baby, and a daughter who is 17... and who is going to need her mother very much in the next few months and years with her own baby coming, I don't see how you cannot make your family your first priority. And 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, para. 47)

Bristol Palin's pregnancy invited additional criticism that Palin had sacrificed her "17-year-old pregnant daughter's right to privacy on the altar of her own political ambitions" (Creamer, 2008, para. 1). CNN's Campbell Brown asked a McCain spokesperson: "how do you respond to people who wonder why her mother would have subjected her to this kind of scrutiny by accepting this high-profile position" (Brown, 2008a). A *Daily Planet* editorial accused Palin of exploiting her daughter: "If Sarah respected the privacy of the daughter and the boyfriend, she would not have thrust herself—and them—into the spotlight at this particular difficult moment. There's no feminist ideology that mandates exploiting and neglecting your kids in order to get ahead. Nancy Pelosi, another mother of five, did it right, and Palin could too if she had an ounce of compassion or a grain of sense" (O'Malley, 2008, para. 18). In other words, wait until your children are grown before pursuing such a high-profile career. Once again, this is something that is never asked of men.

While Hillary Clinton did not have young children, mother frames also created questions about her motives. 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" (Cocco, 2008, para. 9). *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'" (Dowd, 2008e, para. 6).

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. When Chelsea Clinton became a visible part of her mother's campaign, *Politico* writers Ben Smith and Chris Frates (2008) described Chelsea's first trip to Des Moines as one where "She was flying out to be a prop in a frigid airplane hangar... where she stood silently with her grandmother... Chelsea Clinton's presence was part of a last-minute push to humanize her mother before an electorate that sometimes needs to be reminded" (para. 1). The humanization goal of Chelsea's

presence was further described by Amy Chozick (2008) of the *Wall Street Journal* who covered an Iowa event at a high school:

[A]s the crowd filed in and many people didn't have seats she [Clinton] asked Chelsea to give her chair up. The slightly annoyed but smiling Chelsea stood behind her mother for the two-and-a-half hour Q&A session. The interaction sparked a sweet and sincere mother-daughter-moment in a campaign desperately trying to humanize Clinton, who some say comes off as cold (para. 3).

While the *Politico* and *WSJ* characterizations could be described as cynical, *MSNBC* reporter David Shuster's comment that the Clinton campaign had "pimped out" Chelsea by having her call super delegates was best described by *NBC's* president Steve Capus as "irresponsible and inappropriate" ("*MSNBC* Reporter Begrudgingly," 2008, para. 19). Shuster was suspended by the network following an apology.

In an interesting twist on "mothering," Clinton attempted to combine the mother image with the more masculine commander-in-chief. A famous ad dubbed "3 a.m." showed a series of sleeping children followed by an image of a mother checking in on her child. The voiceover asked who we wanted answering the phone in the White House at 3 a.m. and then showed a professionally dressed Clinton with reading glasses answering a phone. The ad was an attack on Obama's lack of experience, but it also emphasized Clinton's understanding of mothers and their concern for their children's well-being. The ad was analyzed extensively by the media and stand-up comic Larry David said what others undoubtedly thought about Clinton: "I watched transfixed, as she took the 3 a.m. call . . . and I was afraid . . . very afraid. Suddenly, I realized that the last thing this country needs is that woman anywhere near a phone. . . . I don't want her talking to Putin, I don't want her talking to Kim Jong II, I don't want her talking to my nephew" (David, 2008, para. 5).

In an even crueler twist to the mother frame was an analysis by Maureen Dowd (2008d) that Hillary was serving the mother role of preparing Obama for the "real" battle: "Whether or not she wins, Hillary has already given noble service as a sophisticated political tutor for Obama, providing her younger colleague with much-needed seasoning. Who else was going to toughen him up? Howard Dean? John Edwards? Dennis Kucinich? (Dowd, 2008, para. 4)." This interpretation is consistent with Kanter's analysis of women in corporations who also prepare and nurture others who then move up the ladder beyond their mentors.

Overall, the mother frame was powerful in both campaigns and neither ended up being as positive as the two women would have wanted. While there were undoubtedly voters who were attracted to both women because they saw them as supermoms who also understood real people's issues, the majority of media talk was not positive and served to diminish both women's credibility. While the next metaphor also demonstrates the harmful nature of stereotypes, it also underscores that the choices the two women made contributed to formation of the metaphors. This statement is not intended to "blame the victims," but it does reinforce the importance of rhetorical choices.

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” (p. 235). 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” (“McCain, Palin to campaign,” 2008, para. 1).

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, 2008b, para. 12)

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.

The childlike treatment went beyond protection from the media, however. At times, McCain spoke of Palin as if she were his child. In the final debate, he spoke about her as a delighted father might: “I’m proud of her. And she has ignited our party and people all over America that have never been involved in the political process. And I can’t tell how proud I am of her and her family” (McCain, 2008b, para. 278). According to Kanter (1977) such treatment is not uncommon as “Competent acts that are taken for granted when performed by males are often unduly ‘fussed over’ when performed by exempt women, considered precocious or precious—a kind of look-what-she-did-and-she’s only-a-woman attitude” (p. 235).

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” (Fox News, 2007, para. 4). The former president told the media that “I can help to sell the domestic program” (Dowd, 2008b). He was described as “the master strategist behind the scenes; the consigliere to the head of

‘the family’” (Healy, 2007). However, Bill Clinton’s attempts to help his wife often played into sexist stereotypes such as when he said at a campaign stop, “I can’t make her younger, taller or change her gender” (Dowd, 2008a, para. 18).

Maureen Dowd, one of Clinton’s sharpest critics summarized Bill Clinton’s presence this way: “As a possible first Madame President, Hillary is a flawed science experiment because you can’t take Bill out of the equation. Her story is wrapped up in her marriage, and her marriage is wrapped up in a series of unappetizing compromises, arrangements and dependencies” (Dowd, 2008c). All three words have the power to impugn her honesty and her ability to stand alone.

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’” (Watson, 2008).

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 (Garber, 2008).

The overt sexism resulted in frequent vulgar overtones. “At Christmas, Hillary Clinton nutcrackers were quite the snapped-up item” (Williams, 2008, p. 10). The “device [was] . . . a pantsuit-clad Clinton doll [who] opens her legs to reveal stainless steel thighs that, well, bust nuts” (Cocco, 2008). The theme was repeated by *MSNBC*’s Tucker Carlson who commented that “When she comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs” (Seelye & Bosman, 2008), and by Chris Matthews who called her male supporters “castratos in the eunuch chorus” (Fortini, 2008). Once again, it is difficult to find a male counterpart to the portrayal or comments.

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]” (para. 3).

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

ways. 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’” (Limbaugh, 2008). Limbaugh was not alone. Donny Deutch of *CNBC* claimed Palin had figured out what Clinton could not. According to him Palin understood how to be tough and feminine, how to use sex appeal rather than denying her sex:

She’s certainly got experience, life gravitas experience, but she’s still young enough to have that physical appeal. That perfect ingredient to sell a woman in power. She’s a lioness. Look, she gave you the brand icon logo, the pit-bull with lipstick. Who wouldn’t want a lioness protecting their cubs? She’s funny, she’s real, she’s rock solid, she’s feisty, she’s smart. If I need to sell Woman in Power to the American public, that’s what I’m putting in my cereal. Hillary Clinton’s cereal maybe only has two or three of those ingredients. So the huge lesson here is: Before you can sell the candidate . . . you gotta first sell her as a woman. This is the new feminist ideal [T]here is the new creation that the feminist woman has not figured out in 40 years . . . that men can take in a woman in power and women can celebrate a woman in power. Hillary Clinton didn’t figure it out. She didn’t put a skirt on! (Deutsch, 2008, para. 4)

While Deutsch found Palin’s pit bull with lipstick the perfect androgynous mix, others painted Palin as having a “visceral style and [a] penchant for attacking critics” with the result that she “pursued vendettas, fired officials who crossed her and sometimes blurred the line between government and personal grievance” (Becker, Goodman, & Powell, 2008, para. 9). *The New York Times* article included examples of hiring friends, firing people who disagreed with her and her policies, making decisions in secrecy, and refusing to turn over various e-mail messages. All of these actions are not uncommon among male politicians, but the article presented Palin as a contrast to the more ideal and idealistic portrayals of her that were in keeping with feminine stereotypes.

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

Sarah 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. (para. 2, 4)

The analysis in this essay demonstrates that the source of sexism was not just "in the minds and hearts of right-wing crackpots and Internet nut-jobs, but it . . . flourished among members of the news media" (Fortini, 2008), and it was anything but subtle or playfully humorous like a *Saturday Night Live* skit. Further, 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.

There is no denial that both Palin and Clinton had strikes against them that contributed to their lack of success, and there are a sufficient number of analyses to point out flawed campaigns and inexperience. But those strikes were unrelated to their being women. Palin was inexperienced and naïve 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.

However, if one accepts the shortcomings of the two campaigns and the two women themselves on political merits, there is still no reason for sexist attacks to enter into the debate. One clear lesson is that the media needs to carefully examine the breadth and depth of the sexism and do more than accept rather weak apologies from major media personalities such as Chris Matthews. A respected journalist or journalism organization should conduct a thorough analysis similar to this one and create a national dialogue among professionals that is aired publicly.

Secondly, women candidates and their campaign staffs need to decide to attack sexism and to attack it early and consistently. Both campaigns dismissed the sexism shown toward the other (Kornblut, 2009) and neither was willing to give a sexism speech similar to Obama's racism address. It is possible that a candidate cannot do it herself and that at some point a woman with considerable credibility who has not been the subject of sexist attacks such as a Madeline Albright or Condoleezza Rice needs to take such a speech on the road.

Finally, we have a responsibility as communication scholars to make our students and the public aware of what took place in 2008. In preparing this essay, we had several well-informed men read drafts. They were shocked at the nature and extent of the sexism in campaign 2008 and even questioned that some of the examples were

real. There is a level of denial as a society that this is a problem, and we have a teachable moment that we should not let pass.

From Victoria Woodhull's "petticoat politician" label to Geraldine Ferraro's size 6 and the Hillary Clinton Nutcracker, American women politicians have been victims of sexism. We know what the stereotypes are, we can find numerous examples, and we know that language shapes thought. If the United States is to see a woman in either of the top two offices in the country, it is going to take more than the "right" woman. It is going to take the "right" view of the offices as being gender neutral.

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