

Sexism in 2008: I thought we were past this

Christina Walker

Women have been fighting for equal rights in this country for two and a half centuries. Equality seems like such a simple idea: a state in which all people within a society enjoy the same status. Although women are generally considered to be equal to men under the law (safe to say, the passage of a national Equal Rights Amendment would eliminate the “generally” in this sentence), many would agree that this equality has not been realized in everyday life. For instance, equality in pay has been protected by law since 1963. Last year, however, women were only paid 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Women are also likely to take more time off of work than men. This simply adds fuel to the fire of sex discrimination at work. (It is important to note that women are often forced to take time off of work due to the unequal distribution of childcare and domestic responsibilities, ideals which are perpetuated by the stereotypical gender roles engrained in American society. A simple way to discourage these gender roles would be to offer paternity leave for men, because as far as I can tell, fathers usually want to spend time with their children too.) Stereotypes and gender roles are institutionalized in this country, and no matter how hard we try or how far we have come, women cannot seem to successfully break these molds that restrict us. I would like to call to attention a recent and extremely pertinent illustration of this fact: the 2008 elections.

This past election cycle made me proud to be an American. However, it pains me to think about the fact that race and gender were still such an issue throughout the cycle. I had hoped we were past it, but we obviously have a long way to go.

The sexism displayed in this campaign was particularly hurtful, rude, obnoxious, and degrading. I am a self-proclaimed feminist, but I am aware of all the negative connotations associated with this word in today’s society. However, I do not understand when calling someone a “feminist” became an insult. Simply put, “[f]eminism is the radical notion that women are people.” However, both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin were victims of the deep-seated misogyny still pervasive in our world.

Hillary Clinton is a woman I greatly respect and admire – and I say this as an Obama supporter throughout the primaries. The lack of respect given to her throughout her campaign was more than disappointing. The media (liberal, conservative, whichever) crossed a line in their coverage of Clinton. As a “woman in a man’s world,” Hillary was up against a lot, so she took the classic route of acting “genderless” throughout her campaign. For this, she was considered harsh, abrasive, and cold. One Fox commentator even stated that every time Clinton spoke, it made him think of his wife telling him to take out the garbage. She has been publicly described as “a she-devil, anti-male, witch with a laugh so loud it resembled a cackle.” (And these were some of the more printable descriptions available.)

There was one instance before the New Hampshire Primary in which Hillary was almost moved to tears. Some decided she was too emotional to be President even though she had remained calm and unexpressive in other

emotion-provoking situations. For example, when a sexist male screamed “Iron my shirt” at a campaign event, Hillary laughed it off and glossed over the scene. She did not start crying or become enraged, even when the mainstream media considered the spectacle amusing. Also, let us not forget the poignant “nutcrackers,” made in Hillary Clinton’s likeness, which were selling in airports across the nation. Perhaps the most disheartening example was a t-shirt with the slogan, “If only Hillary had married O.J. instead.” In such progressive times, one cannot understand how inciting violence against women is in anyway amusing, let alone appropriate, behavior for an American presidential election.

Even though many Americans, men and women alike, did not agree with her political ideologies nor were they unaware of her ridiculous political blunders throughout the campaign, Sarah Palin also faced tremendous sexism. First of all, Sarah Palin, or any woman for that matter, would not have been for McCain’s running mate in any past election year. McCain chose a woman to “diversify” the Republican ticket and to gain support from the Hillary voters who were still mourning her loss and were not ready to accept Obama as their candidate. The simple idea that women would vote for the McCain-Palin ticket simply because Palin is also a woman was ignorant and insulting. Putting aside the fact that Palin and Clinton differed so much in political ideology that the idea of a truly liberal Hillary supporter voting for Palin was basically ridiculous, it was patronizing that the McCain campaign believed women to be so fickle, uninformed, and impressionable that women would cast their votes based entirely on the gender of the candidate. If this were true, women would not have been the voting majority in past elections where both candidates were men.

After she accepted the nomination, Palin acted as though the McCain camp directed her on how to behave and what to say. Since Republicans are viewed as the “traditional and conservative” party, and Palin definitely exemplifies those attributes, there was no reason for her to behave so overly stereotypical, unless if it was the role McCain wanted her to play. For instance, why did she feel compelled to keep mentioning that she was a “hockey mom?” And I still cannot make sense of why she paraded herself around like she was in a Miss America pageant. Although it is clear that Palin suffers from the clear institutionalization of gender roles in American society, I also believe her behavior could be seen as a direct response to the negative media attention Hillary received by acting “genderless.” It was obvious that ignoring the society-assumed gender roles did not work out well for the Hillary campaign.

My hope is that one day I will not need to be a self-proclaimed feminist anymore, because on this day, it will be assumed that everyone supports equal rights for women. In other words, everyone could be considered a feminist. I also hope that one day people no longer feel obliged to conform to stereotypical gender roles, since these norms only perpetuate the sexist nature of American society. Despite what some men may think, women are tired of the fight. However, women and men alike need to work together to eradicate sexism and misogyny from our society. Many of us are all too aware that the flames of the feminist movement ignited by our ancestors during the century-and-a-half-long suffrage movement and the women’s movement of the 1960s are slowly fading. As Americans, both men and women, we cannot allow this to happen.

In an effort to make an impact, albeit quite small, I want to send a message to my generation, the Millennials, that it could be different for us. It could be different for our children and our children's children. However, realizing this change will take a commitment from each and every one of us. To those of you who aspire to be leaders and professionals in the business and finance world, strive to treat men and women equally and fairly. For those of you who end up working for the media in any capacity, do not perpetuate the stereotypes or the sexist status quo that our country has come to accept. If you decide to work in the political field, follow the paths that have been paved in this past election and break the traditional mold. Support candidates even though they may not look or act exactly like you. And perhaps most importantly, for those of you who plan to be mothers, fathers, teachers, or mentors, be a positive influence in the lives of the next generation. Do not allow them to sit idly by and conform to oppressive societal norms. Teach them that ignorance and complacency fuel discrimination and inequality.

Suggested Further Readings:

Alternet.org – Election 2008: <http://www.alternet.org/election08/>

Change.org:

http://womensrights.change.org/blog/view/election_reflection_5_did_sexism_prevail_in_2008

Hillary Clinton for President Archived Website: <http://www.hillaryclinton.com/>

The Left Coaster Blog: <http://www.theleftcoaster.com/archives/011889.php>