

Sexism in political coverage affects public perceptions

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Just as the media's role in forming public opinion about gender-based violence is critical, so is its responsibility in shaping attitudes about women's leadership.

Questions about a woman's family obligations and how they will conflict with the political role she seeks remain common and are illustrative of the public man/private woman binary that dictates how gender is regulated and performed. Questions, comments, and critiques about a woman's marital/relationship status, family status, appearance, dress, tone and octave of her voice, and her ability to keep a smile on her face for all of eternity are commonplace for women in politics. They are not things focused on to any significant degree for men in politics. When they are, men are given a pass or commended about the same things for which women are criticized or chastised.

Politics has historically been constructed as the domain of men. Masculinity sets the standard for political leadership, and when women enter politics, they are scrutinized for not acting enough like or too much like men. For example, with something as common as speaking, powerful speech is associated with masculinity. When men speak, their address is ranked as more knowledgeable, convincing, and trustworthy than when women speak, even when the content of the speech is identical. Political women are censured for speaking too softly, diplomatically, too much, too pointedly, too passionately, or in a manner critical of patriarchy or other power structures.

Due to the pervasive sexism and misogyny experienced by women in politics, not to mention the racism, ableism, etc., by people whose identities intersect in ways that are not white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male, women politicians need to be especially deliberate in deciding how they will relate to the media and address the stereotypes and expectations that come with their gender identity. And therein lies the rub because when women adopt various characteristics, be it the ways of speaking or dressing, to be perceived as serious contenders, they are then perceived as cold, aggressive, too competitive, unfeminine, and unlikeable. But, again, when women candidates try to talk about the skills or traits, they bring to the role that are characteristically feminine, such as compassion, the media and, ultimately, consumers of media perceive her as weak.

It is commonplace for women candidates and politicians' family status to be scrutinized by the media, while the same is not generally true for men. And we find ourselves with not only a double standard here but also a double bind. The double standard is that the families of men in politics – when not ignored – generally serve to humanize and benefit the men, whereas a woman's family, particularly if she has young children, raises questions about her ability to take

on a role in politics. The double bind is that women are simultaneously perceived as not fit or capable for politics because they have children and are perceived as incapable of understanding various issues if they do not have a partner and children.

While the media has the power to begin to change the narrative about understandings of gender and gender roles, with limited time and resources, they more often continue to rely on these stereotypes, given how straightforward the understanding is by the general public. The simplest way to get past this is to consider if what is being written about a woman would be written about a man and – maybe most strikingly – if a position would be modified in writing or broadcast with ‘man’ or ‘male’ the same way media is inclined to do with ‘woman’ or ‘female.’