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# The Feminist Reawakening

**Hillary Clinton and the fourth wave.**

By Amanda Fortini Published Apr 13, 2008

*Illustration by Paula Scher*

Not so long ago, it was possible for women, particularly young women, to share in the popular illusion that we were living in a postfeminist moment. There were encouraging statistics to point to: More women than men are enrolled at universities, where they typically earn higher grades; once they graduate, those who live in big cities might even receive higher salaries—at least in the early years of employment. The Speaker of the House is female, as are eight governors and 16 percent of Congress (never mind that this is 11 percent fewer than Afghanistan's parliament). Many women believed we had access to the same opportunities and experiences as men—that was the goal of the feminist movement, wasn't it?—should we choose to take advantage of them (and, increasingly, we just might not). There was, of course, the occasional gender-based slight to contend with, a comment on physical appearance, the casual office badminton played with words like *bitch* and *whore* and *slut,* but to get worked up over these things seemed pointlessly symbolic, humorless, the purview of women's-studies types. Then Hillary Clinton declared her candidacy, and the sexism in America, long lying dormant, like some feral, tranquilized animal, yawned and revealed itself. Even those of us who didn't usually concern ourselves with gender-centric matters began to realize that when it comes to women, we are not post-anything.

The egregious and by now familiar potshots are too numerous (and tiresome) to recount. A greatest-hits selection provides a measure of the misogyny: There's Republican axman Roger Stone's anti-Hillary 527 organization, Citizens United Not Timid, or CUNT. And the Facebook group Hillary Clinton: Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich, which has 44,000-plus members. And the "Hillary Nutcracker"

with its "stainless-steel thighs." And Clinton's Wikipedia page, which, according to *The New Republic,* is regularly vandalized with bathroom-stall slurs like "slut" and "cuntbag." And 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. And Rush Limbaugh worrying whether the country is ready to watch a woman age in the White House (as though nearly every male politician has not emerged portly, wearied, and a grandfatherly shade of gray). And those two boors who shouted, "Iron my shirts!" from the sidelines in New Hampshire. "Ah, the remnants of sexism," Clinton replied, "alive and well." With that, she blithely shrugged off the heckling.

It was hardly a revelation to learn that sexism lived in the minds and hearts of right-wing crackpots and Internet nut-jobs, but it was something of a surprise to discover it flourished among members of the news media. The frat boys at MSNBC portrayed Clinton as a castrating scold, with Tucker Carlson commenting, "Every time I hear Hillary Clinton speak, I involuntarily cross my legs," and Chris Matthews calling her male endorsers "castratos in the eunuch chorus." Matthews also dubbed Clinton "the grieving widow of absurdity," saying, of her presidential candidacy and senatorial seat, "She didn't win there on her merit. She won because everybody felt, 'My God, this woman stood up under humiliation.' " While that may be partly true—Hillary's approval ratings soared in the wake of *l'affaire* Lewinsky—Matthews's take reduced her universally recognized political successes to rewards for public sympathy, as though Clinton's intelligence and long record of public service count for nothing. Would a male candidate be viewed so reductively? Many have argued that the media don't like Clinton simply because they don't like Clinton—even her devotees will admit she arrives with a complete set of overstuffed baggage—much in the same way they made up their mind about Al Gore back in 2000 and ganged up on him as a prissy, uptight know-it-all. But whatever is behind the vitriol, it has taken crudely sexist forms.

Even when the media did attempt to address the emergent sexism, the efforts were tepid, at best. After the laundry incident, *USA Today* ran the extenuating headline, "Clinton Responds to Seemingly Sexist Shouts." A handful of journalists pointed out the absurdity of the adverb. "If these comments were only 'seemingly' sexist, I wonder what, exactly, *indubitably* sexist remarks would sound like?" Meghan O'Rourke wrote on The XX Factor, a blog written by Slate's female staffers. Many women, whatever their particular feelings about Hillary Clinton (love her, loathe her, voting for her regardless), began to feel a general sense of unease at what they were witnessing. The mask had been pulled off—or, perhaps more apt, the makeup wiped off—and the old gender wounds and scars and blemishes, rather than having healed in the past three decades, had, to the surprise of many of us, been festering all along.

Of course, we weren't delusional. Even before Tina Fey declared, "Bitch is the new black," before female outrage had been anointed a trend by the New York *Times*, many women were clued in to the numerous gender-related issues that lay, untouched and unexamined, at some subterranean level of our culture: to the way women disproportionately bear the ills of our society, like poverty and lack of health care; to the relentlessly sexist fixation on the bodies of Hollywood starlets—on the vicissitudes of their weight, on the appearance and speedy disappearance of their pregnant

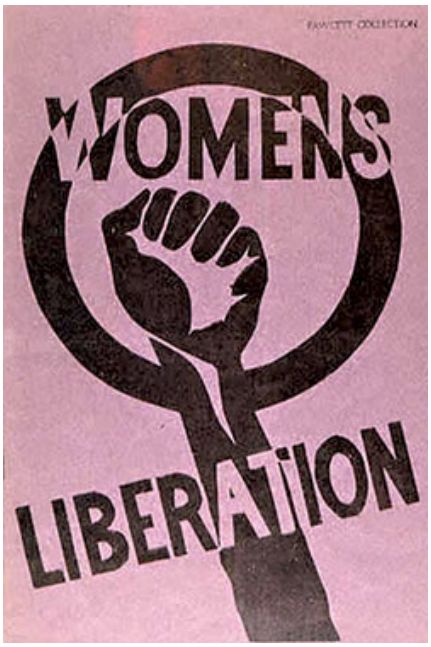
bellies—and the deleterious influence this obsession has on teenage girls; to the way our youth-oriented culture puts older women out to graze (rendering them what Tina Brown has called, in a nod to Ralph Ellison, "invisible women"). But who wanted to complain? It was easier—and more fun—to take the Carly Fiorina approach: to shut up and compete with the boys. Who wanted to be the statistic-wielding shrew outing every instance of prejudice and injustice? Most women prefer to think of themselves as what Caroline Bird, author of *Born Female*, has called "the loophole woman"—as the exception. The success of those women is frequently cited as evidence that feminism has met its goals. But too often, the exceptional woman is also the exception that proves the rule.

Indeed, it might be said that the postfeminist outlook was a means of avoiding an unpleasant topic. "They don't want to have the discussion," a management consultant who worked at a top firm for nearly a decade told me, referring to her female colleagues. "It's like, 'I'm trying to have a level playing field here.' " Who wanted to think of gender as a divisive force, as the root of discrimination? Perhaps more relevant, who wanted to view oneself as a victim? Postfeminism was also a form of solipsism: *If it's not happening to me, it's not happening at all.* To those women succeeding in a man's world, the problems wrought by sexism often seemed to belong to other women. But as our first serious female presidential candidate came under attack, there was a collective revelation: Even if we couldn't see the proverbial glass ceiling from where we sat, it still existed—and it was not retractable.

The women I interviewed who described a kind of conversion experience brought about by Clinton's candidacy were professionals in their thirties, forties, and fifties, and a few in their twenties. In some cases, the campaign had politicized them: Women who had never thought much about sexual politics were forwarding Gloria Steinem's now-infamous op-ed around, reiterating her claim that "gender is probably the most restricting force in American life." In other cases, it had *re*-politicized them: A few women told me they were thinking about issues they hadn't considered in any serious way since college, where women's-studies courses and gender theory were mainstays of their liberal-arts curricula. "That whole cynical part of me that has been coming to this conclusion all along was like, I knew it! We've come—not nowhere, but not as far as we thought," one said. A not insignificant number of women mentioned arguments they'd had with male friends and colleagues, who disagreed that Clinton was being treated with any bias. A high-powered film executive for a company based in New York and Los Angeles recounted a heated debate she engaged in with two of her closest male friends; she finally capitulated when they teamed up and began to shout her down. Nearly all of the women I interviewed, with the exception of those who write on gender issues professionally, refused to be named for fear of offending the male bosses and colleagues and friends they'd tangled with.

In particular, the campaign has divided women and the men they know on the subject of race. Indelicate as it seems to bring up, the oft-repeated question is, why do overtly sexist remarks slip by almost without comment, while any racially motivated insult would be widely censured? A few women told me that when they raised this issue with men, the discussion broke down, with the men arguing that racism was far more pernicious than sexism. "If you say anything about the specificity of Hillary being a woman, you're just doing the knee-jerk feminist stuff, that's the reaction," said one woman who asked not to be identified in any way. "Thinking about race is a serious issue, whereas sexism is just something for dumb feminists to think about." The point is not to determine whether it is harder to be a white woman or a black man in America today, nor which candidate would have more symbolic value. At issue is the fact that race is, as it

should be, taboo grounds for criticism, but gender remains open territory.



The cover of a newsletter from the seventies. (Photo: Mary Evans Picture Library)

Why doesn't our culture take sexism seriously? Gloria Steinem has suggested that "anything that affects males is seen as more serious than anything that affects 'only' the female half of the human race." If that's true, and I'm not convinced it is, then women are also culpable. Sexism is often so subtle, threading its insidious way through many aspects of our existence, that anyone who talks about it risks sounding like an overzealous lunatic at worst—scrutinizing every interaction for gender-specific offenses, dichotomizing the world into victim and oppressor—or trivial at best. "Even the brightest movement women found themselves engaged in sullen public colloquies about the inequities of dishwashing and the intolerable humiliations of being observed by construction workers on Sixth Avenue," Joan Didion once wrote. And so, in our reluctance to appear nagging, scolding, hectoring, or petty, many of us have made a practice of enduring minor affronts, not realizing that a failure to decry the smaller indignities can foster blindness to the larger ones. We then find ourselves shocked when one of the smartest, most qualified women ever to run for public office is called "fishwife-y" by a female pundit on national television.

The post-Hillary shift in awareness, for lack of a better term—*movement* still seems a gross overstatement—has created an unusual alliance that belies the pre- and post-boomer generational divide propounded by the media. The second-wave feminists are said to have cluck-clucked at a younger generation of women, who, oblivious to past struggles, refused to join their team and vote for Clinton. (Historians generally divide the movement into three phases or "waves": the turn-of-the-century suffragists; the equal-rights activists of the sixties and seventies; and the gender and queer theorists of the nineties.) But, according to my anecdotal research, it isn't just "the hot-flash cohort," to borrow another phrase from Tina Brown, that broke for Clinton. Women in their thirties and forties—at once discomfited and galvanized by the sexist tenor of the media coverage, by the nastiness of the watercooler talk in the office, by the realization that the once-foregone conclusion of Clinton-as-president might never come to be—did, too. We haven't heard much about these women, perhaps because in this demographic, there is peer pressure to vote for Obama. A woman I interviewed described the atmosphere of Obama-Fascism in her office: "I really object to the assumption that everyone is voting for Obama in our cohort, but that's the assumption these guys talk under," she says. "They feel only idiots would vote for Hillary. There's this kind of total assumption that of course any thinking person is voting for Obama."

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Old-guard feminists, for their part, seem not yet aware—or prepared to believe—that the younger generation is coming around. “Young women take a lot of things for granted,” Geraldine Ferraro told me. “We sometimes joke, ‘If you don’t get it, give it all back.’ We don’t want to say, ‘Look how bad it was.’ But they don’t know their workplaces are better because of loudmouths like me who said, ‘This is not how society should be run.’ ” Linda Hirshman, author of *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*, said she thinks the feminist movement, even the third wave, may have seen its final days. For another movement to reach critical mass, she said, women in society may need to experience what she calls “an accretion of insult.” But with the inequities highlighted by Hillary Clinton’s presidential bid reminding us of the inequities we experience on a regular basis, the insults may have, well … accreted.

Any woman who has spent time in the workforce likely understands what a powerful, defining force gender can be. “We used to have a saying in the women’s movement,” says Leslie Bennetts, author of *The Feminine Mistake*. “It takes life to make a feminist.” The real divide among women of voting age is between those who have encountered gender-based hurdles and affronts as they pursued their professional ambitions and those who have not: between women in their twenties, still in college or recent graduates, and women who have worked at a job where something (money, prestige, reputation) is at stake. This may in part explain why very young women voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama: The parity on college campuses, where women often outperform men academically, can feel like it must translate into parity in the world. I remember reading Sylvia Plath’s journals in a college seminar titled Biography, Gender, and Suicide—it was straight out of a Woody Allen movie—and finding them overwrought and whiny, a bitter recitation of every domestic duty and slight. Similarly, I wondered what Hélène Cixous and her feminist poststructuralist sisters were howling about. At that point, my only experience with sexism was a high-school debate in which my coach asked me to take my hair out of a bun so that I didn’t look “so severe” for the judges. (I left my hair up—and won.) To my mind, equality was the rule.

Once you get into the working world, however, even if you view that world as fundamentally equitable, you understand what it means to be bound by one’s gender, for gender to always be an issue. “It’s just a vibe when you’re a woman and you walk into a room and you’re in a position of power and you have to convince them of something,” a movie producer told me. “You’re constantly juggling: When you’re soft, you’re too soft; when you’re strong, you’re too strong. It’s a struggle in business and a struggle in relationships. It’s always a struggle.” Many professional women thus empathize with Clinton. It’s not so much that they’ve experienced such blatant sexism—in today’s corporations, even the most odious boss tends to be leashed—but that they know well the ways that gender complicates the workplace, and can relate to the struggle to balance femininity and toughness. Many have faced a version of her quintessential quandary: They may be more likable, more approachable, when playing to notions of traditional femininity (mother, wife, victim), but this doesn’t fly in the workplace. “To try to hide her womanliness or enhance it—that’s a decision Obama would never have to make,” said one woman. “I’m not saying it’s harder to be a woman. It’s just a choice she has to make that he doesn’t.”

In the public realm, women are frequently subjected to a sort of bodily lit-crit, where dress and demeanor are read as symbolic of femininity or a lack thereof. We have seen this with Hillary: Her current pantsuits, her erstwhile headbands, that sliver of cleavage, have all generated much speculation. Geraldine Ferraro

told me that the scrutiny hasn't changed all that much from a quarter-century ago. "When I ran for VP, they said, 'You have to wear a jacket'—I was going to wear a short-sleeved dress. They said, 'We haven't seen that with a VP candidate before,' and I said, 'I don't care, you haven't seen a woman candidate before.' " Professional women, too, experience a version of this and tend to be acutely aware of the assumptions that can arise from their choices. Do you wear the glasses to the interview, or take them off? Button up the jacket, or leave it open? Pull the hair up, or leave it down? Allow a hint of sexiness to wink at the male interviewer or recruiter or boss, or go the androgynous route? For women in clubby, male-dominated industries, like banking and consulting, the objective is often to appear more masculine (and ward off the suspicion that you will someday procreate and thus become professionally unviable). "They cultivate a hard edge, pressing to be more masculine in their manner and the way they deal with people," the management consultant told me. "They develop a reputation for being cutthroat, for being hard, even harder than men, for having exacting standards. If I think of the women I know who have gone into banking, their personalities have changed; there's a difference in their whole bearing."

But some intrinsically female characteristics are more complicated to manipulate. One's voice, for instance: Clinton's flat, nasal, and, lately, hoarse voice has not fared well against Obama's rich baritone. The pundits have repeatedly labeled her shrill—another criticism that is only ever made of a woman. The sound of a woman's voice is among the most important factors determining her success. Margaret Thatcher famously lowered her pitch on the advice of a spin doctor, and she's not the only one. A study that compared female voices between 1945 and 1993 found that, in the latter half of the century, as young women entered the workforce in increasing numbers, their voices deepened, with the average pitch decreasing about 23 hertz. Think of that "career-woman voice" donned, consciously or not, by so many working women in Manhattan. A high, reedy, or uncertain voice can stall a woman's ascent. When my former (female) boss told me I needed to work on "presentational confidence," I concentrated on making my voice, and speech, more commanding.

Another way women attempt to transcend stereotypes is through what Linda Hirshman calls "the dancing backwards in high heels thing"—or, working harder than any man presumably would. Nearly all the women I spoke to referred to the feeling that one can confound perceived gender limitations by doing a more thorough job, being smarter, better informed, better researched. I think of it as the studying-for-extra-credit approach. The idea is that we can shift the focus from the arbitrary, personal criteria by which we are evaluated—whether we have children or not, are married or not, are warm enough, or too cold, or too calculating, or overly ambitious—onto our achievements. But it doesn't necessarily happen that way, as many of us, including Hillary Clinton, have learned. It turns out that even the tendency to overprepare is gendered (to borrow a term from the women's-studies crowd) in the popular perception. Clinton is portrayed as a Tracey Flick type, as one of those girls: the ones actually studying in study hall. In real life, that gets you elected class secretary or VP of operations, but never the No. 1 spot. "Leadership" is more effortless, an *assumed* mantle of authority, confidence that doesn't need a PowerPoint presentation to back it up. But it's difficult to imagine this traditionally male archetype—embodied in Obama's easy manner and unscripted, often overly general approach—working for a woman in the same way it does for a man. "There's no way you could put his words, his message, in her mouth and get away with it," said one of the women I spoke with. "If you took his campaign message, his speeches, his everything and you put it on her, she'd be fucked."

None of this is to say Obama hasn't had his own stereotypes to confront during this campaign. He has faced criticism for being "too black" or "not black enough." He's had to battle the unfounded yet persistent Internet rumor that he's a radical Muslim. And when his controversial pastor evoked questions about race and patriotism, Obama promptly dealt with the matter, giving one of the most complex and sophisticated speeches a politician has ever delivered.

There has been clamoring for Clinton to make the gender equivalent of Obama's race speech. In this idealized homily, Clinton would confront the insidiousness of sexism and speak out against the societal ills that affect women; she would renounce the unfair criteria, at once more stringent and more superficial, by which women are judged. She might even address the compromises she is said to have made in her life—this is idealized, remember—and tell us why those compromises, rather than making her an inferior candidate, instead make her a stronger one, as they can be viewed as her imperfect resolutions to the dilemmas faced by many women: Do you stay with a man who has betrayed you, or divorce him? Do you keep your name, or take your husband's? Do you put your career aside for his—at least for a time?

This speech, of course, is not likely to happen. Not only because, as was pointed out on The XX Factor, women disagree on such fundamental issues as abortion and child care, or because Clinton is politically cautious and to do so would risk alienating male voters. A speech like this would open Clinton to the criticism, leveled at her several times already in this campaign, and at any female candidate who refers to her gender or acts in a particularly feminine way (by crying, for instance)—that she is "playing the gender card." It would also, sadly, only serve to reinforce the sort of stereotypes she would hope to counter: the nag, the crusading feminist, the ballbuster, the know-it-all with reams of statistics at the ready. But the fact that women are even imagining what such a speech would sound like on the national stage is significant.

As the Pennsylvania primary nears, pundits and party members are again, as they did before Ohio and Texas, calling for Clinton to step down. ("The model of female self-sacrifice is deeply embedded in our culture," notes Bennetts.) And indeed it's becoming increasingly difficult to see how this political cycle could end with her victorious. It is perhaps cold comfort to say that if she loses the nomination, her candidacy leaves behind a legacy of reawakened feminism—the fourth wave, if you will. But this is in fact what is happening.

The past few months have been like an extended consciousness-raising session, to use a retro phrase that would have once made most of us cringe. We've parsed the gender politics of the campaign with other women in the office, at parties, over e-mail, and now we're starting to parse the gender politics of our lives. This is, admittedly, depressing: *How can we be confronting the same issues, all these years later?* But it's also exciting. It feels as if a window has been opened in a stuffy, long-sealed room. There is a thrill at the collective realization. Now the question is, what next?