

Misogyny and Sexism: Coming Right Up!

By Jan Collins

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If Hillary Clinton receives the Democratic Party nomination for president in 2016, brace yourself for misogyny and sexism galore. For ambitious women, it has ever been thus.

As the writer Jessica Valenti puts it, “For as long as women have wanted to have a voice in our political process, there have been men looking to shut them up with slurs and condescension. And it shows no sign of stopping – or even slowing.”

At the head of the class, of course, is Donald Trump. Clinton, he declared crudely, was “schlonged” by then-Senator Barack Obama in the 2008 primary contest. And then Trump had the temerity to protest that “schlonged” didn’t mean what all of us know it means—even those of us who aren’t from New York and don’t speak Yiddish.

The Donald, however, had to get in line to insult Hillary. Over her many decades in the public eye, she has been called, among other things, “a bitch,” “hysterical,” “shrill,” “too emotional.” Nutcrackers were constructed in her image. And remember the guy who repeatedly screamed “iron my shirt” at one of her rallies?

Hillary’s hair style, her legs, her clothing have been slammed. Her laugh has been mocked as a “cackle.” She has emasculated her husband, the gossips whisper.

In 2008, radio jock Rush Limbaugh famously asked: “Will this country want to watch a woman get older before their eyes” every day? And stepping right up to the plate recently was Mitch McConnell, the Republican Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, who opined that the Democrats’ “presidential ticket for 2016 is shaping up to look like a rerun of ‘The Golden Girls.’”

These sexist slurs aren’t new. In 1872, when Victoria Woodhull ran for president before women even had the right to vote, she was labeled “Mrs. Satan,” a witch, and a “harpy.” More than a century later, an opponent of Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, tweeted she was “a member of the world’s oldest profession,” and a talk-show host referred to Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., as a “high-class prostitute.”

A few months ago, Donald Trump outdid even himself by insulting the looks of Carly Fiorina, a fellow GOP candidate for president and the only female Republican in the race. Taking aim at the businesswoman during a magazine interview, he said, “Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president....Are we serious?”

It’s not only in the United States, of course, where ambitious women are demeaned. In 2011, David Cameron, now the U.K.’s prime minister, told Angela Eagle, the then-shadow treasury secretary, to “calm down, dear” during a session of Parliament.

In 2012, Cecile Duflot, then housing minister, endured wolf-whistles as she delivered a speech in France’s National Assembly. Defending his male colleagues later, one politician said the whistles had been “in tribute” to her.

In Italy in 2009, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared on live TV that Rosy Bindi, president of the Democratic Party, was “more beautiful than intelligent.”

And after Park Geun-Hye won the presidency of South Korea in 2012, North Korea blamed rising tensions between the two countries a few months later on Park’s “venomous swish of the skirt.”

The most disturbing part of all this is that even mild sexist comments have been shown to be damaging to female candidates, according to USA Today. The newspaper was discussing the results of a poll conducted in 2010 by the Women’s Media Center and the Women’s CampaignFund. The survey asked 800 likely voters to listen to descriptions of two hypothetical congressional candidates, Jane Smith and Dan Jones.

Half the voters then heard a back-and-forth about the candidates that used the words “ice queen” and “mean girl,” and then the word “prostitute,” to characterize the woman. The other half of the sample heard a back-and-forth without those labels.

The findings showed the female candidate lost twice as much support when even mild sexist language was added to the attack. The hypothetical candidate rebounded only when she directly responded and called the discussion

“inappropriate” and “meritless,” and also decried “sexist, divisive rhetoric” as damaging “to our political debate and our democracy.”

As we welcome 2016, I’m dreading the nasty anti-female rhetoric that undoubtedly will characterize the presidential campaign if Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee. So I ask: why are some men still as afraid of powerful women as they were centuries ago?

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