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The Reinforcement of Hegemonic Masculinity Through Gender Frames During the 2016 Election

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Introduction

Races for public office are often tiring, cutthroat experiences. Candidates, at any level, must battle both each other and the terrifying beast known as the media. The media uses news frames to portray stories of news, elections, people, etc. in a certain light (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 38). News frames are typically slanted, and they may lead the public's opinions of the reported subject or story to parallel the opinion of the news source. Gender frames have an immense effect on women. These frames damage women's images, deter voters, and take the spotlight away from women's political qualifications and what truly matters in a campaign: policies and issues. Because the media's use of gendered frames taints the public's opinion of female candidates, women are often caught in a tight bind, struggling to find a healthy way to act masculine *and* feminine while still promoting their platforms.

The 2016 presidential election took the world by storm as it turned into a battle of the genders. This paper documents the framing of three particular women: Kamala Harris, Megyn Kelly, and Melania Trump. These women occupied diverse social and political positions during the election cycle, and findings regarding gender framing demonstrate the pervasive influence of media frames. We argue that gender frames,

while having varied influence on elections, more often than not limit women to traditional gender stereotypes, reinforcing intrinsic sexism and bias that exist in society today.

Framing: Definitions

American elections and politics in general are beholden to hegemonic gender stereotypes. Hegemonic gender refers to roles and characteristics that society expects men and women to emulate. A news frame is gendered when the media labels a person as either a conformist or a nonconformist to hegemonic gender stereotypes (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals). Gendered news frames affect both men and women and often intersect with other factors such as race. For example, within the marginalized masculinity frame, Asian men are often seen as weak and/or feminine when compared to other races (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals 37).

The literature surrounding women and politics discusses several ways that women can be framed, and we review six examples of such framing here. The "iron lady" frame emphasizes the unemotional, tough, even masculine characteristics of a female candidate (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 122). The "sex object" or "seductress" frame emphasizes the physical appearance of a female candidate more heavily than qualifications or policy positions (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 121). The "pet" or "child" frame asserts that a female candidate does not have the ability to lead or enact change on her own, but rather needs a man to help her (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 122). The "motherhood" frame emphasizes the nurturing characteristics of a female candidate, suggesting that her role as a mother directly impacts her political positions or actions.

The "mammy" frame asserts that while a female candidate of color is self-sacrificing, she is flawed in that she takes on too much work (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 123).

When the media depicts stories with gendered news frames, it triggers negative reactions from the public toward the subjects, especially political elites during election seasons. Gendered news media frames have the power to influence elections, as voters often times choose candidates not based on policy preferences, but on unrelated characteristics. Even if a voter believes they are casting their ballot based on policy, it is likely that they are still "[relying] on stereotypical conceptions of women and men's traits, issue expertise, and policy positions" (Lawless 78). For example, there was substantial "evidence suggesting sexism affected Hillary Clinton's coverage" in 2008 (Goren and Uscinski 892).

Cases

Our first case regards Kamala Harris, the former Attorney General of the State of California who recently won her bid to replace the retiring Barbara Boxer in the United States Senate–coincidentally a woman Harris claimed to admire very much (Myers; Wire). During the 2016 California Primary on June 7, in which the top two candidates are considered co-winners, Harris advanced to the general election along with fellow Democrat Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez, a member of the United States House of Representatives (Alvarez; Williams; Willon, "Kamala Harris Cashes in on the State Democratic Party's Senate Endorsement While Her Rival Gets Nothing"). In the general election on November 8, Harris faced off against Sanchez once again, eventually winning the senate seat and ending the California senate race of 2016 (Lara; Reilly). We will discuss the extensive media coverage of the candidates and their campaigns

between the June 7 primary and the November 8 general election. The second case herein discusses Fox news anchor Megyn Kelly. Throughout his campaign, President Trump bombarded Kelly with demeaning rhetoric. The feud between Kelly and Trump began during a Republican presidential debate in August 2015, with Kelly serving as the moderator, and the press continued to discuss the feud for the duration of the election. The final case we will discuss details press coverage of Melania Trump. Throughout the summer and fall of 2016, Melania became increasingly popular within the media, and the public, after presenting a speech at the Republican National Convention in July. The speech turned into a national joke due to sections that were clearly plagiarized from Michelle Obama's speech in 2008. We will explain how the media's portrayal of this event impacted Melania's image. As mentioned above, we will use three very different cases to demonstrate how the media similarly framed a diverse group of women during the 2016 campaign and election. Our analysis of each case relies on no fewer than fifteen news articles from prominent news outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Case 1: Kamala Harris

Kamala Harris has been subjected to the mammy frame throughout her whole career. While she is not a mother, the media still emphasizes her nurturing characteristics and points to her caretaking tendencies. *The Los Angeles Times* recounts some of Harris' most promising accomplishments, notably having to do with housing and education (Willion, "8 things to know about Senate candidate Kamala Harris' career gold stars and demerits"). Though Harris works in many issue areas, the emphasis on these "soft issues" of housing and education reinforces the stereotype that she must be a

nurturer and caretaker. The mammy frame also places an emphasis on a woman being content with crushing workloads (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 123). *The Mercury News* applies this stereotype to Harris, calling her a "workaholic" (Artz).

Harris also is subjected to the sex object frame. Typical of the sex object frame is mention of a woman's outfit and attractiveness. In a story in *The New York Times*, her outfit is analyzed in detail as the author recounts, "Harris... arrived in a black pantsuit and stilettos with black beads at her throat" (Bazelon). By finding the stilettos and black beads significant enough to mention, *The New York Times* reinforces the idea that Harris' looks are equally as if not more important than her political contributions. Later in that same article, it is also unnecessarily mentioned that Harris "had worked out earlier that morning" (Bazelon). *The Mercury News* also makes mention of Harris' outfits, pointing out that she "nearly always appears publicly in a gray suit" (Artz). The same story also contains statements made years ago by President Obama, referring to Harris as "by far the best-looking attorney general in the country" (Artz). Speaking about Harris based on her physical looks rather than by her qualifications and credentials, reinforces the sex object frame.

Additionally, as with many female politicians, Kamala Harris has been viewed through the iron lady frame. Women often feel the need to make themselves seem unemotional and tough to appeal to a wider range of voters. *The New York Times* applied this technique to Harris by referring to her experience in law enforcement as district attorney and attorney general. The Times reported that being tough "may help candidates repel bias against electing women" (Bazelon). If women candidates do not seem "tough enough," they can be seen as too weak to serve in office. An article published in *The San Francisco Chronicle* speculated about whether Harris was "ready

to shed her 'cautious' label" (Garofoli). The article goes on to say that while one of

Harris' campaign slogans was "fearless," she has not acted fearlessly as attorney general,

avoiding "hot button" political issues in California (Garofoli). On the other hand, the

iron lady frame can be used to portray women as too emotionless. When during the

California Senatorial Debate, Congresswoman Sanchez performed a quick modern

dance move known as "the dab," the unamused Attorney General Harris was painted as

not having a good sense of humor (Brown; Zaru). This might have deterred voters by

convincing them that Harris was cold and impersonal. Harris was not involved in a race

as high-profile or contentious as the presidential race, but she was still subjected to

gender frames.

Case 2: Megyn Kelly

Throughout his campaign, Trump arguably made the most vulgar comments any

campaign has ever seen, many of them about Megyn Kelly. As Trump, and later Newt

Gingrich, spewed negative remarks about Kelly, the media capitalized on the subject and

continuously reported his most famous accusation that she had "blood coming out of

her whatever" (Poniewozik, "A National Descent Into Trump's Pants"). The comment

refers to a Republican presidential debate in August 2015, in which Donald Trump

debated several candidates on stage, as well as moderator Megyn Kelly. Kelly proved to

be a formidable obstacle to Trump, who accused the Fox News anchor of being too tough

on him (Poniewozik, "Fox News vs. Trump: Setting Free the Golden Goose"). Trump

suggested that Kelly was being moody because she was menstruating, an outrageous

statement supported by no evidence. This rhetoric put Kelly in the iron maiden frame,

making her seem tougher than the other male moderators who refrained from bringing

up Trump's past comments towards women. Though Kelly had an appropriate response to Trump's remarks, she did, and still does, face harsh criticisms from many Trump supporters. Since the debate in August, women have continued to attack her because of her opposition to Trump, saying that she "is ugly as hell on the inside" (Tumulty and Johnson). Kelly suffered from Trump's comments because of the amplified reporting by the media. News sources continued to paint Kelly as an iron maiden-like monster, prompting discussion about her menstrual cycle and exposing a very private aspect of her, and any woman's, life. It was this kind of reporting that led to her widespread public disapproval, especially from women who still feel infuriated from the sex scandal that plagued Bill Clinton's presidency (Tumulty and Johnson).

The media's continued inflation of the comments made at the debate sexualized Kelly, portraying her in the seductress or sexualized frame. In October 2016, for example, Margaret Sullivan of *The Washington Post* published a story that described the news anchor as possibly the hottest property in TV news. *More Magazine* referred to her as America's most beautiful badass. Along with this, Newt Gingrich proposed that Kelly was "fascinated with sex" (Haberman), a story that was then circulated by multiple media sources in a matter of hours. This comment went on to be praised by Donald Trump and, as expected, reported by many more news sources. It is important to note that the media reporting primarily focused on Gingrich's comments towards Kelly and not *why* she was being accused of being fascinated with sex. Her reason for bringing up sex multiple times was to direct the conversation toward Trump's sexual misconduct scandals. As it was her job to do so, Kelly was trying to shine light on the uncertainty of his past and his mistreatment of women. Newt Gingrich twisted the story by suggesting that Kelly was obsessed with sex. This has had very negative consequences for her, made

worse by Trump's endorsement of Gingrich's comments. Kelly became the talk of mainstream media, outlets continuing to blast headlines that defined her as a sex-obsessed woman. A severely widespread issue, some men—41% as reported by the Pew Research Center—do not believe that women face issues with sexism. This is in stark contrast to the 63% of women who feel subordinated due to their gender. ("In both parties, men and women differ over whether women still face obstacles to progress"). She made virtually no progress with her original effort to investigate Trump's sexual assaults of women in the past, and now has a reputation among many voters as a moody slanderer.

Case 3: Melania Trump

Melania Trump, former model and wife of Donald Trump, has been a frequent subject of interest in the media. Already criticized for her "trophy wife" status and lack of college education, Melania Trump's image did not receive a positive treatment from the media and its gendered news frames. Ever since the convention speech debacle of July 2016, during which it was discovered that much of Melania Trump's remarks were very similar to those of Michelle Obama eight years earlier, Ms. Trump has continuously been compared to Ms. Obama and other admired presidential/candidate spouses with excessive criticism because of specific gender news frames. The plagiarism of the former First Lady's 2008 Democratic National Convention speech shocked the nation and only heightened the media's negative opinions and frames of Melania Trump.

Many news articles described Melania Trump as stylish and beautiful, but not many articles contained information about what she had to offer or what she planned on contributing if and when she became First Lady (Beck 1-3). Because of her lack of

appearance in the political realm during the 2016 election, many media sources interpreted her quiet and solitary style within the motherhood frame, conveying her as someone who focuses more on her maternal responsibilities rather than political leadership and other responsibilities the spouse of a presidential candidate is expected to have (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 121). For example, when it was announced that the future First Lady would not be moving into the White House until after her young son, Barron, finished this school year, the media used it to depict her as a mother whose child-and not her husband's career-was her main priority. The media began comparing Melania to past First Ladies, describing her not as a Michelle Obama or Nancy Reagan, but more of a Jackie Kennedy—a First Lady who wished to stay out of the political realm and instead focus on herself and her family (Lucey 1, Brower 1-7). However, unlike Jackie Kennedy, Melania's choice to stay out of the political scene was viewed negatively due to today's social standards of how a modern First Lady, or any public and respected figure, should act (Datta 11). According to Gallup, Melania Trump's approval rating in July of 2016 were only at 28%, while Michelle Obama's final 2008 approval rating was 53%, and Tipper Gore's approval rating at 57% in 2000. Even though there were times when Melania Trump was out on the campaign trail speaking at rallies and events, her time was mainly spent at home with her son—unlike Michelle Obama who seemed to be capable of balancing being a mother of two daughters with being a supportive and active wife on the campaign trail.

In addition to the motherhood frame, Melania Trump was identified with the sex object frame due to the scandalous photo shoots from her former international modeling career. The sex object frame focuses on a woman's appearance and detracts from any other message she is trying to share to the public (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers

122). When Melania did make rare appearances at political campaigns, she would often not be taken as seriously or viewed with as much credibility as previous spouses of candidates because of her lack of a formal education and previous career. When compared to Michelle Obama in the media, photos of a nude, handcuffed Melania posing for *GQ* magazine would often be contrasted with professional and modest photos of Michelle, creating slanted coverage and distorting the public's interpretations of Melania. Although Melania has expressed her pride in the photos, many people do not consider them to be professional or what the First Lady should be known for (Gopinath 16).

Articles also categorized Melania Trump according to the gendered pet frame. As a stereotypical trophy wife, Melania's marriage to Donald Trump has given her more luxuries than what her modeling career alone could have offered her. The pet frame identifies women who are not independent enough to make things happen on their own (Dolan, Deckman, and Swers 122). As a small town girl from Slovenia, Melania Trump certainly worked for her modeling career and did so on her own terms; however, throughout the 2016 election, many times her marriage to Donald Trump was viewed as a one-sided dependency. The media has suggested that without her husband, Melania would have never been able to create her fashion and jewelry line, and without the election acting as a marketing opportunity, her brands would not be as well-known as they are today (Otterbourg). Through the use of gender frames, Melania Trump was viewed as lacking the potential to succeed without the help of her husband.

Conclusion

As our research shows, women in the political sphere continue to be subjected to the perils of old-school gender stereotypes. Our examination of the cases of Kamala Harris, Megyn Kelly, and Melania Trump reveal the reality that women are still being portrayed through gendered frames. Whether they are sexualized, criticized for being too motherly, or grilled for being stone cold and emotionless, women are constantly under the scathing public eye. This is, in large part, due to how the media portrays women. In the case of Megyn Kelly news sources decided to focus heavily on attacks against her as opposed to what she had to say, leaving her practically defenseless. When looking at the case of Melania Trump, we saw her unfairly compared to Michelle Obama regarding the balance between her personal life and role as the First Lady. While Kamala Harris did not receive the same level of media attention as those involved in the presidential race, she too was framed in an unfairly gendered way in her race to political office.

When looking at the nature of the circumstances surrounding the three very different women studied in this paper, we must acknowledge a toxic common theme. What we are experiencing, and have been for decades, is the gender-normatively biased treatment of women. Whether they are an overly-emotional Hillary Clinton running for public office, a sex-obsessed Megyn Kelly representing a news organization, or a male-dependent Melania Trump trying to overcome being labeled as subordinate, females are put into frames that dehumanize them. By focusing on their roles as seductresses, pets, mothers, and iron ladies, the media are undermining their historic feats. Recognizing sexism is one part of the battle; acting on it is another. Going forward, it can no longer be acceptable for powerful women to just brush off sexist remarks, as Hillary Clinton did in her 2008 presidential campaign by saying that sexism was "alive and well" (Lawless

72). To actually combat the discriminatory tones that plague the nation, we need

challenge the gender frames rampant in the media. This is the only way to level the

political playing field for women in the future.

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