

Breaking the glass ceiling

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Sexism: Is that what ended Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential dream?

It's a question that's been raised in these waning days of the Democratic presidential primary by Clinton's passionate supporters and even by some inside her campaign.

It seems a regrettable turn in the conversation to some observers because it could be used to demean and insult so much of what Clinton has accomplished.

In the past two years, the New York senator has demonstrated that a female candidate can draw as much money as — and more than — most male candidates and build a first-class campaign operation.

She's shown that a woman can master domestic and foreign policy and earn respect — if not agreement — from her Democratic colleagues as well as Republican rivals.

She's shown that a woman can tough it out on a seemingly endless campaign trail through sleepless nights and under the extraordinary 24/7 glare of media scrutiny.

She's proven, through public opinion polls, that voters now believe a woman can be smart enough and tough enough to become commander in chief of the most powerful military in the world.

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And she's shown that all of that can be accomplished without abandoning the very femininity that makes her campaign quest historic.

She can laugh, charm, tear up and beam at the sight of her daughter on stage and not lose an ounce of credibility on substance.

These are profound accomplishments that risk being belittled by an eleventh-hour blame game.

"Once the atmosphere clears, I don't see the image of a woman beaten down by sexism. I see a woman standing tall, demonstrating leadership and grit and fighting and breaking through," says Ruth B. Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University and former director of the institute's Center for American Women and Politics.

To be sure, there were ugly moments along the way.

Some talk show hosts went over the line, injecting a sexist coarseness into the national debate. A Catholic priest launched into an anti-white-entitlement rant in a Chicago church that led to a succession of required apologies. The revival of the Clinton nutcrackers was nothing short of vulgar.

Geraldine Ferraro, one of the first to sound the sexism alarm, has asked Harvard University's Shorenstein Center to conduct a study of the slights and insults that Clinton has endured to ensure there is some accountability for — and record of — them.

Kathleen Dolan, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, agrees that sexism played a part in the campaign. “Most people know it is not OK to be a racist,” says Dolan. “The problem for Sen. Clinton is that sexism is still OK and it doesn’t raise the same kind of clear bright line.”

But Dolan and other analysts — male and female — don’t believe that’s what ultimately will cost her the nomination.

Clinton is losing the nomination fight just like hundreds of men who have come before her — because she made a few more political mistakes than her competitor.

Early on, she adopted a general election message that made it impossible for her to assuage resentment boiling among the party’s activists over her vote for the Iraq war.

Her initial offerings on economics reached back into the 1990s rather than embracing the forward-looking “change” agenda being set by the voters.

Her campaign described the primary at the outset as a race for delegates but then failed to organize itself to master the rules and compete for every last one of those delegates.

And, as Clinton made a midcampaign correction, time began slipping away and Barack Obama began building what is now an insurmountable pledged delegate advantage.

Bottom line: Clinton made a handful of mistakes in the most unforgiving of primary environments, a race so tight, so evenly matched, that to lose any primary or caucus by a fraction of a percent could mean forfeiting the prize.

Indeed, Clinton’s gender proved more strength than weakness in this year’s titanic struggle.

Joe Biden, Chris Dodd, Bill Richardson and even John Edwards could not survive Obama’s Iowa upset.

Only one candidate could tap into a vast support base to soldier on, and that was Clinton, with her throngs of history-seeking supporters.

They pushed her over the top in New Hampshire and extended her candidacy again in Ohio and Pennsylvania and on through Tuesday’s final contests in Montana and South Dakota.

That show of strength has been powerful and instructive, both for the Democratic Party and for women of this generation and the next.

To end this race by saying that even Clinton — a woman who built a mighty campaign machine and had such a command of policy that she could clean the debate floor with her male opponents — couldn’t win because she is a woman could send a negative message to the next generation of female candidates and all of America’s daughters.

Clinton will leave soft ground for them, and they should feel empowered to run on it.

There are some these days who are also inverting the sexism argument. Clinton may not have lost because she’s a woman, but Obama got a pass because he’s a man, they

argue. Voters and political analysts never would have taken a candidate with inspirational gifts but a thin political résumé seriously if he were a she.

That may be true. It may also not be so. The truth is, we won't know for sure until we've met her. And nothing said about this year's campaign should discourage even her from someday vying for the prize.

"Gender is a multifaceted issue," says Mandel, and it did play a big role in this year's presidential race.

"[Clinton] is the first woman to be taken seriously as a candidate. She is the first woman to win a primary. She has made history."

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