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Even in defeat, victory

By cracking a glass ceiling, Clinton made it easier for the next woman to run for president, strategists say.

By Thomas Fitzgerald
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Two hecklers interrupted Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's January campaign event in a high school auditorium in Salem, N.H., demanding, "Iron my shirt! Iron my shirt!"

Clinton paused as police escorted them outside. "Oh, the remnants of sexism - alive and well," she said, adding, to applause, that she was hoping to "break through the highest and hardest glass ceiling."

Six months later, Clinton's failure to crack that barrier is prompting an assessment beyond the usual dissection of a campaign's tactical and strategic mistakes: What role did her gender play, and what does it mean for the future?

The consensus among pollsters, strategists and scholars is that Clinton's experience will make it easier for the next woman to run for president. After all, Clinton raised about \$200 million, got 18 million votes, and won the votes of droves of white working-class men never expected to be part of her base.

"For most voters, a woman president is no longer a hypothetical," said Ellen Moran, executive director of Emily's List, a group that works to elect Democratic women. "Now, we can see it. She answered the question of whether a woman can hold her own in a venue that has been male-dominated since the birth of the nation."

First, though, Sen. Barack Obama will need to win over angry female Clinton supporters who have vowed not to vote for the presumptive Democratic nominee.

What Clinton called the "remnants of sexism" was pretty virulent. Consider the obscene T-shirts, some news-media fixation on her pantsuits and appearance, and some male commentators on cable TV who mocked her voice as shrill or joked about emasculation.

More than that, though, some Clinton supporters saw discrimination in repeated calls from party leaders and pundits for her to withdraw, even though she was winning the later primaries. Male candidates in the past faced the same pressure, but it seemed disrespectful to many.

"Women who have been the backbone of the Democratic Party feel our party has

betrayed us - this was our time," said Cynthia Ruccia, 55, a Mary Kay cosmetics dealer from Columbus, Ohio, who formed Clinton Supporters Count Too, a protest group. "This campaign brought out some very ugly fissures."

She said she would vote for McCain. "Let's see them try to win without us," Ruccia said.

Jennie Walker, 45, went to Clinton's rally in New York City on Tuesday, the night Obama clinched. "I admire her for sticking it out," said Walker, who said she would consider voting for the Republican. The last days of the primaries were "absurd," she said. "No man would have been asked to quit. It's so gender-biased."

Still, exit polls suggest that gender was a net positive for Clinton, forming a strong base that enabled her to get as far as she did because of rock-solid support from middle-age white women, many of whom entered the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s and identified strongly with her struggle for advancement.

White women preferred Clinton to Obama by an average of 24 percentage points in this year's Democratic contests, according to exit polls. She even carried this group in 70 percent of the primaries Obama won.

A Pew Research Center poll last month found a 13-point drop in Obama's favorability rating among white women, with 43 percent expressing a positive opinion of him, down from 56 percent in late February. The change occurred as it became clear Clinton could not win the nomination, reflecting what the center termed a "negative reaction" from frustrated backers.

In a nod to the challenge, Obama lavished praise on Clinton last week for breaking barriers, a contrast to some instances in the campaign when he seemed more dismissive, such as in an early debate when Obama said, "You're likeable enough, Hillary." After a celebratory rally, Obama met with a small group of die-hard Clinton supporters; more such outreach sessions are planned.

He said he had told the group he appreciated "that they were as inspired by her candidacy as some of my supporters are inspired by mine. They're not alone in drawing inspiration from her campaign. My own daughters now take the possibility of a woman being president for granted."

Without a template to follow, Clinton successfully navigated the "double bind" that women face as political candidates, according to Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University: how to project toughness without being dismissed as too strident.

"We saw her blaze a trail . . . that women can be strong and knowledgable and have the tenacity to be commander in chief, while still talking about issues of families and children," Walsh said.

Marie Wilson, president of the nonpartisan White House Project, which trains women to enter politics, said many participants in the group's recent seminars had cited Clinton as an inspiration.

"She opened the door," Wilson said.

Moved by Clinton's example, Gretchen Fontichiaro attended a "Go Run" training session last weekend in Lansing, Mich. She wants to run for her school board or the Michigan House of Representatives.

"The fact that she got as far as she did was amazing," said Fontichiaro, 44, who lost a school-board bid last year in Spring Lake, Mich. "I realized . . . it's never too late to see what I can do. . . . Too many women think, 'I'm just a housewife,' or, 'I'm just an administrative assistant,' and they can't make a difference. That's not true at all."

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