

Gender politics in Ohio: Clinton mostly ignores Palin

by *Lois Romano* - Sept. 16, 2008 01:21 PM
The Washington Post

AKRON, Ohio - Halfway through September, in the sprint to Election Day, and the scene at a sweltering gym in this rusted, blue-collar city looked like one of those marathon days back in April.

"Hil-lar-y! Hil-lar-y! Hil-lar-y!!" chanted the 1,500 supporters, mostly white women, who had waited patiently for their heroine. Hillary Clinton was back in Ohio, a critical battleground state that she won handily in the primary. This time, she is campaigning for her former rival, and there's a new glass-ceiling smasher.

Clinton has given no indication she smarts about this dramatic turn of events. She has kept a low profile since her speech at the Democratic National Convention three weeks ago, declining to grant interviews as she campaigned in Florida, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Nevada. She mentions Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin only in passing. Sunday, armed with a 19-minute stump speech, boldly dressed in a bright fuchsia jacket, she was energetic and forceful as she moved about the rally here and in Elyria, outside Cleveland, urging all her supporters to vote for Barack Obama.

"Barack and I may have started on separate paths, but we are on the same journey now," she

said, trying to convince her audience, women who wear large "Hillary Rocks" buttons and carry signs from her presidential campaign. She said Obama would pursue universal health care, make college affordable and end the war in Iraq. She charged that John McCain would privatize Social Security and "still thinks it's OK that women aren't offered equal pay for equal work."

Obama "would have had a better go of it had he picked Hillary for his running mate," said Barbara Price, a quality inspector in Elyria. She supported Clinton for president and says she is worried about the new energy that Palin has provided to the Republican ticket.

This industrial city could be a microcosm of what women have been wrestling with since the Alaska governor was selected as McCain's running mate. She has been praised as strong and genuine, an Annie Oakley in heels who strove for and got it all: career, family, guns. Her popularity has solidified the conservative base, but it has also raised new questions about gender and politics, and whether ANY female regardless of qualifications or views who reaches the pinnacle of power can be considered a good development for ALL women.

At these rallies were the working women from middle America who saw Clinton as a passionate advocate for their causes. Many were bewildered and indignant at polls showing that white women with children have swung toward McCain since he picked Palin, a social conservative.

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"If women were supporting Hillary just because she was a woman and now can switch to Palin - they have no idea what Hillary stands for," said Tish Hopkins, a retired teacher. "It's not just about gender."

The comparisons between Clinton and Palin were inevitable - two politicians in a uniquely powerful place for women. But while Palin has tried to align herself with Clinton to reach some of her supporters, Clinton has been reluctant to highlight their differences when it comes to women's advocacy. Widely discussed in Democratic circles is whether Clinton should specifically take on Palin and define what her election could mean for women. Clinton and the Obama campaign agree that she should ignore Palin and focus instead on the top of the ticket, McCain, to avoid the specter of two women publicly squabbling.

"Every time the focus is off McCain, Democrats are wasting their time," said Paul Costello, who has worked for a number of women in politics, including Kitty Dukakis and Rosalynn Carter. "Hillary should be talking about why McCain is wrong for women."

Counters one Democratic operative, who has been urging Clinton to take on Palin: "She should because she can and be credible."

The closest Clinton came to criticizing Palin on Sunday: "I want to rephrase slightly something I said at the Denver convention. If you look at

everything that is going on in the world, and what's at stake in this election, no way, no how, no McCain and no Palin."

Ohio has lost tens of thousands of job in the past few years, and Clinton focused Sunday on the economically struggling northeast part of the state.

"Senator McCain says our economy is fundamentally sound. I wish he'd come here and talk to you," she said. "All that McCain and Palin offer is four more years of the same failed policies."

"This all makes me very nervous because it has taken Obama off message," said Rebecca Farr, a retired high school counselor. "But it is not Hillary's job to do Obama's job for him."

Kat Saunders, 18, who will vote for the first time this year, said Palin and Clinton are hot topics at the high school lunch table. "I don't understand what women see in Palin because she seems to me to be very old-fashioned, not someone who will walk us to the future. She doesn't represent anything I care about. She is against a woman's right to choose. I just don't see anything there for me."

"Palin is spunky and cute, and I have no reason to dislike her," said Jackie Hoover, a paralegal. "But that doesn't make her qualified to lead the country just because she's a woman. I just can't see her staring down (Russia's Vladimir) Putin."

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Women have fought hard for a place in the political hierarchy, and Palin's elevation to the national scene - the first time a woman has been on a presidential ticket in 24 years - can only be viewed as an advance for women. "We are now talking about women, and we haven't really seen that in the past few presidential elections, and that in and of itself has some value," says Marie Wilson, founder and president of the nonpartisan White House Project, which aims to advance women's leadership. "Women are on the agenda .. and it's causing people to look at what it is women want. That has promise."

But Wilson is quick to add that beyond knowing that Palin is firmly against abortion, she doesn't know where Palin stands on a multitude of other issues critical to women such as equal pay, health care and "some kind of choice on the number of children we want to have."

"What you have created here is a narrative that doesn't let people look underneath to the issues or reality - all we see in the narrative of the self-sufficient Western woman," Wilson says.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers, said that women are relating to Palin as someone "juggling work and family, and perhaps because it's not a perfect family, it seems."

"Right now, we are not talking about issues," she said. "Moderate Republican women are excited to see their party put a woman up there, but

these same women may be struggling because she may be too conservative for them."

Republicans insist it isn't far-fetched to expect some Clinton supporters to take a look at Palin because in the end, it could be her personal story that carries Palin among women, not just issues or experience. "Two-thirds of women who supported Hillary are not attainable, but the other third didn't support her because of issues," said media consultant Alex Castellanos. "They supported her because she is a real American leader who happened to be a woman who demonstrated great strength. That's what they see in Palin. In these uncertain times, a test of character comes first. Without that, policies and issues mean nothing."

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