

POLITICO

Why so few women in infidelity club?

By: [Melanie Mason](#)
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When South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford admitted to an extramarital affair on Wednesday, he presented an all-too-familiar tableau: the pained expressions, contrite words and teary gaze of a male politician confessing sexual indiscretion. Coming close on the heels of a similar admission from Sen. John Ensign (R-Nev.), it is clear that sex scandals will always be with us.

But after two of the same dramas within two weeks, it's fair to ask: Does the casting ever change? Are female politicians really that much more faithful — or are they just not getting caught?

"We don't have any data that women are more honest and pure when it comes to this sort of stuff," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "But we certainly have evidence that we just don't see women falling prey to [public disclosure of affairs] in the same way that men have been."

Walsh recalled one female politician who confessed to an affair: Former Rep. Helen Chenoweth (R-Idaho), who admitted in 1998 that she had a six-year relationship with her former business partner before she took office.

And there have been others. In 1989, during her re-election campaign for mayor of Charlotte, Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) was found to have had an affair with a married man in the 70s. In 1998, Rep. Mary Fallin (R-Okla.), who is running for governor of her state in 2010, faced allegations of an inappropriate relationship with a state trooper while she was lieutenant governor.

Even so, there is a wide discrepancy between the number of male and female politicians who wind up in the hot seat. Several explanations could account for this.

First, of course, is the matter of numbers. Men far outnumber women in elected office, and statistical probability dictates that if a random politician is caught in a sex scandal, it is overwhelmingly likely that the politician would be male.

"If anything, it's a reminder of how relatively few women hold public office," said Juliet Williams, an associate professor of women's studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

For Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.), the issue is one of privacy. "Before I got to Congress, I could go out to a bar and have drinks with a friend. Now I wouldn't do it, even if it were with my brother, because I know it would make news."

Others say the complicated relationship between sex and power is apt to play a role.

"I guess men in power are terribly attractive to some women, but I don't think that women in power are attractive to some men," said former Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Colo.), who was co-chairwoman of Gary Hart's scandal-plagued presidential campaign in 1988.

And that means, according to relationship expert Suzie Johnson, that male politicians may be lavished with sexual attention they are unprepared to handle. "Most of these politicians were the high school boys that couldn't get the cheerleader," said Johnson, whose website [GoAskSuzie.com](#) specializes in issues of infidelity. "Now the situation is reversed."

Being so outnumbered in the political realm can also lead to greater media scrutiny for politicians — think, for example, of the brouhaha over Hillary Clinton's V-neck blouse that sparked a lengthy discussion on the appropriate amount of cleavage a female politician should reveal.

"Women are more conscious and aware that they are being held to an even higher standard," Walsh said. "Therefore, they're even more cautious."

Others say women in high-power careers are so overloaded already that affairs are an unlikely possibility.

As Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) points out, “Who has the time? I don’t have enough time in the day to take care of the responsibilities I have between work and family.”

Women tend to be able to juggle a lot, but with so many pressures, throwing an extra romance in the mix may feel like just another item to have to multitask. “In a certain way, it’s a privilege, and it still belongs predominantly to men,” said Williams, who is herself a mother.

Evolutionary psychology can also explain the dearth of married females entangled with infidelity.

“The tendency or willingness to transgress sexual boundaries in general is much more likely in men than in women,” said Paul Abramson, author of the forthcoming book “Sex Appeal: Six Ethical Principles for the 21st Century.”

Abramson, a psychology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, added that “women are socialized to be much more cautious about sexuality due to the fact that they can get pregnant. Having an affair is a sexual risk, and women are much less inclined to do that.”

In her role as a relationship counselor, Johnson has seen many men tempted by novelty and exoticism (which harkens back to Sanford’s “exotic” jaunt to Argentina). Women, on the other hand, often are attracted to closeness and intimacy, she said.

“That’s the reason you don’t see more female politicians having affairs,” Johnson said. “Women are less likely to have physical affairs but more likely to have emotional affairs, and there’s no way to bust those.”

And, of course, there is always the possibility that female politicians have their own sexual indiscretions the public simply doesn’t know about. Those secrets may stay hidden for a while. According to Johnson, “women are way more clever at covering [affairs] up.”