





Where Have You Gone, Roseanne Barr?

The media rarely portray women as they really are,
as everyday breadwinners and caregivers

By *Susan J. Douglas*

It's October 2009, and after a hard day at work—or no day of work since you've been laid off—and maybe tending to children or aging parents as well, you click on the remote. On any given evening, in fictional television, you will see female police chiefs, surgeons, detectives, district attorneys, partners in law firms and, on “24,” a female president of the United States. Reality TV offers up the privileged “real” housewives of New York, Atlanta, and New Jersey, all of whom devote their time to shopping or taking their daughters to acting coaches. Earlier in the evening, the nightly news programs, and the cable channels as well, feature this odd mix: highly paid and typically very attractive women as reporters (and on CBS, even as the anchor) and, yet, minimal coverage of women and the issues affecting them.

Many of us, especially those who grew up with “Leave It to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best,” are delighted to see “The Closer” (Kyra Sedgwick) as an accomplished boss and crime solver, Dr. Bailey (Chandra Wilson) as the take-no-prisoners surgeon on “Grey’s Anatomy,” and Shirley Schmidt (Candice Bergen) as a no-nonsense senior partner on reruns of “Boston Legal.” Finally, women at or near the top, holding jobs previously reserved for men, and doing so successfully!

But wait. What's wrong with these fantasy portraits of power? And what are the consequences of such fantasies? In short, what happened to everyday women in the media? Where is Roseanne Barr when we need her?

Fantasies of power

The profound gap between media images and lived reality

So here is the unusual conjuncture facing us in the early 21st century, and especially amid the Great Recession: Women's professional success and financial status are significantly overrepresented in the mainstream media, suggesting that women indeed "have it all." Yet in real life, even as most women work, there are far too few women among the highest ranks of the professions and millions of everyday women struggle to make ends meet and to juggle work and family. "Roseanne" humorously balanced that almost impossible mix, engaging audiences of millions, men and women alike, because of its cheeky take on everyday situations. By contrast, what much of the media give us today are little more than fantasies of power.

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So what much of the media have been giving us, then, are little more than fantasies of power.

Why should policymakers pay attention to media images of women? Because the media—and especially (although not exclusively) the news media—may not succeed in telling us what to think, but they certainly do succeed in telling us what to think about. This is called agenda setting, and thus it matters if the real lives of most women are nowhere on the agenda, or if the agenda promotes the fantasy that full equality is now a reality for all women. And policymaking matters because the news media typically follow the lead of political elites in Washington.

If the president, or Congress, make an issue such as "ending welfare as we know it" a top priority, the news media will cover the debates around welfare, which will invariably focus some attention on poor women and their families. Without prominent politicians emphasizing the ongoing pay gap between men and women, or the

continuing child care crisis in our country, and proposing major legislation to address such issues, the news media will rarely take up such topics on their own.

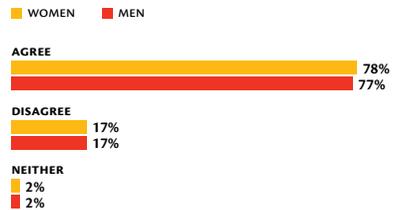
This essay argues, then, that it is time to consider the rather profound contradictions between image and reality currently facing us, and to examine the consequences they might have on public policy and on the lives of women and their families. These contradictions include:

- Women’s occupations on television that bear scant resemblance to the jobs women actually hold
- Successful, attractive women journalists in front of the camera that masks how vastly outnumbered women are by men as experts and pundits
- The hype of the nontrend of mothers “opting out” of the workplace rather than the real lives of mothers as breadwinners
- Young women in America portrayed as shallow, cat-fighting sex objects obsessed with their appearances and shopping
- The dismissive coverage of powerful, successful women versus their real achievements
- The denigration of feminism—which is a movement important to the well-being of men, women, and children—as somehow irrelevant to the realities of the workplace and family life in the 21st century

What might the repercussions of these misrepresentations be? Well, it’s misleading for the media to imply that full equality for women is real—that now they can be or do anything they want—but then

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: The realities of family life today are not adequately represented in news and entertainment media?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.



BRIDEZILLA? In this photo from WE TV, 20 brides-to-be dive into a giant wedding cake in New York's Times Square in search of a winning raffle ticket. The event kicked-off season two of WE: Women's Entertainment's original series, "Bridezilla," the reality program that seriously overplays the planning of weddings. {DIANE BONDAREFF, WE TV, AP}

simultaneously suggest that most women prefer domesticity over the workplace. This reinforces the notion that women and men together no longer need to pursue greater gender equality at work and at home. Roseanne Barr, for one, would never stand for it.

That's why this essay argues that we need to remember what the feminists of the 1970s taught us—ridiculing unrealistic media images can be fun as well as important.

If you immerse yourself in the media fare of recent years, what you see is a rather large gap between how the vast majority of girls and women live their lives, the choices they must make in life, and what they see—and don't see—in the media. Ironically, it is just the opposite of the gap in the 1950s and '60s, when images of women as stay-at-home housewives, or blonde bombshells, effaced the exploding number of women entering the workforce, attending college, and becoming involved in politics. Back then the media illusion was that the aspirations of girls and women weren't changing at all when in fact they were. Now, the media illusion is that equality for girls and women is an accomplished fact when it isn't. Then the media were behind the curve; now, ironically, they're ahead.

The discrepancy between the reality of most women's economic situations and what we see on our nation's TV, computer, and silver screens is deep and profound.

At the same time, there has been a resurgence of retrograde dreck clogging our cultural arteries—"The Man Show," *Maxim* magazine, "Girls Gone Wild," and "The Bachelor"—that resurrect stereotypes of girls and women as sex objects obsessed with romantic love and pleasing men.¹ And, finally, representations of women as working-class or middle-class breadwinners, such as those we used to see in "Roseanne," "Grace Under Fire," "One Day at a Time," "Kate & Allie," and "Cagney & Lacey," have virtually vanished from the small screen.

The situation is equally contradictory online. Sites such as Catalyst.org, for example, seek to advance professional opportunities for women, yet one of the most successful and important news and entertainment websites, the Huffington Post, also showcases, on its main page, stories about actresses posing nude. And then there's the "Jezebel" controversy, in which bloggers claiming to speak for a new generation of liberated young women write under the handle "slut machine" and dismiss the prevalence and impact of date rape.²

Of course, women online are also engaged in far more positive efforts to inform Americans about the hard realities of work and life today. Case in point:

PunditMom, the blog that makes clear the connection between mothering and politics. But overall, the discrepancy between the reality of most women's economic situations and what we see and hear on our nation's TV, computer, and silver screens is deep and profound.

These gaps between image and reality have both honorable and ignoble roots. Certain show creators, writers, and producers have indeed sought to develop "role model" characters who demonstrate that women can hold jobs previously reserved for men, including that of president of the United States. News organizations, local and national, have recognized the importance and appeal of female reporters and anchors.³

Of course, advertisers, the main support of most American media, want to present "aspirational" images of financially comfortable, even wealthy people so we will envy the future selves we will become if we buy their products. Thus, women's magazines need to provide a congenial environment for such ads and to offer visions of the individual empowerment that will result from exercise, the right makeup, and shrewd consumerism. The film industry, focused on the young and especially the teenage audience, devotes the bulk of its output to superheroes, science fiction, and "chick flicks" in which the women are desperate to get married.

The mainstream news media, faced with cutbacks and declining audiences, have reduced their hard-news coverage and investigative reporting in favor of lifestyle, celebrity, and soft-news features.

But let's not forget the persistence of plain old sexism. Talk radio is dominated by conservative men who are either openly sexist or have no interest in how the economy or public policy affect women. The mainstream news media, faced with cutbacks and declining audiences, have reduced their hard-news coverage and investigative reporting in favor of lifestyle, celebrity, and soft-news features. Websites that aggregate and then comment on this kind of news coverage rarely replace it with reporting of their own. And advertisers' niche marketing, which divides women up by age, race, class, and lifestyle, allows mainstream and alternative media alike to target younger audiences with more stereotypical images.

Why should we care about something as evanescent and often banal as media imagery, or the contradictions between this imagery and women's everyday lives? Because the media, in their many forms, have become such powerful and ubiquitous institutions in our society, shaping public understandings of which issues and which people are important and which ones are not. The media are not, as some in the industry would have us believe, "mirrors" simply reflecting reality.

The media are funhouse mirrors that magnify certain kinds of people, values, attitudes, and issues, while minimizing others or even rendering them invisible.

Rather, the media are funhouse mirrors that magnify certain kinds of people, values, attitudes, and issues, while minimizing others or even rendering them invisible. Through the repetition of particular images and the erasure of others, the media play a central role in constructing a national "common sense" about who we are and who we should be. And these distorted reflections contain and perpetuate significant class biases by either ignoring or silently ridiculing most women who make less than \$100,000 a year and aren't media perfect in appearance.

Because of the privileged position that rich, successful, or exceptional women now hold in the media, there exists a blackout, however unintended (or not), of how the majority of women, and especially those whose median earnings are about \$36,000 a year or less, live their lives.

Dr. Meredith Grey, meet my hairdresser

Women's occupations on television versus the jobs women actually hold

For decades, television drama has been dominated by crime-fighting shows, police and detective stories, hospital dramas, and soap operas, with some programs hybrids of these genres. Although it took a while (in the aftermath of the women's movement), by the 1990s the success of "Law & Order," "L.A. Law," and "E.R." led to more celluloid female professionals, including law firm partners, female doctors, surgeons and hospital administrators, and female cops and police officers, especially in the 10 p.m. prime-time slot. By 2009, here's a partial lineup of whom we had met:

- Lt. Anita Van Buren on “Law & Order”
- Detective Olivia Benson on “Law & Order: SVU”
- President Mackenzie Allen in “Commander in Chief”
- President Allison Taylor on “24”
- Deputy Police Chief Brenda Johnson on “The Closer”
- Detective Claudette Wymys in “The Shield”
- White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg on “The West Wing”
- Dr. Lisa Cuddy, the hospital administrator and benighted boss of Dr. House in “House”

All these women, concentrated in high-profile, male-dominated lines of work. Hey, do women have it made, or what?

And the way they get to talk to their male bosses or co-workers! Lt. Anita Van Buren (S. Epatha Merkerson) tells a doctor who demands to see his patient, a suspect in a murder case, “Until you have more stars on your collar than I do, Doctor, you can’t demand a damn thing.” In “Grey’s Anatomy,” Dr. Bailey (Chandra Wilson) is equally fearless when taking on her superiors. She notifies her boss Dr. Burke (Isaiah Washington), “I think you’re cocky, arrogant, bossy, and pushy, and you also have a God complex, you never think about anybody but your damn self.”

These are delicious fantasies for women—to succeed and be taken seriously in male-dominated professions, and to be able to talk back to male privilege. That’s one of the reasons all these shows are successful. Nonetheless, they overrepresent how far women have in fact come in the workplace, underrepresent the kind of work most women do, and misrepresent how women can, and do, comport themselves on the job.

The most telling case in point: the top five jobs for women in the United States are not surgeon, lawyer,



FANTASY. Women characters on TV are concentrated in high-profile, male-dominated lines of work. From top, Dr. Lisa Cuddy on “House,” Lt. Anita Van Buren on “Law & Order,” and White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg on “The West Wing.”

{PHOTO CREDITS FROM TOP: ADAM TAYLOR, NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA AP IMAGES; WILL HART, NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA AP IMAGES; NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA AP IMAGES}

police lieutenant, district attorney or cable news pundit. In fact, the top five jobs for women in 2008 were, in first place, secretaries, followed by registered nurses, elementary and middle school teachers, cashiers and retail salespersons. Further down the list? Maids, child care workers, office clerks, home health aids, and hairdressers.⁴

Or consider that in 2008, the median earnings for women was \$36,000 a year, 23 percent less than that of their male counterparts.⁵ And even more privileged women who attend college still earn 80 percent of what men make one year out of college. (And 10 years out? 69 percent.)⁶ Of the top Fortune 500 companies in 2008, only 15 had a female chief executive, and only 1 percent of police chiefs are women.⁷ And mothers, as financial journalist Ann Crittenden amply documents, pay an enormous price in lost wages once they have children, a price fathers rarely pay.⁸

Also, various studies suggest that rather than verbally smacking down their co-workers—let alone their superiors—the majority of female supervisors are “team builders,” often more open and accessible than men, more tolerant of and able to deal with different styles and personalities, more likely to solicit advice. They are, again in contrast to the tough-talking broads on TV, actually more likely to praise co-workers and to mentor and motivate them.⁹

It is male managers, according to these studies, who are more likely to punish co-workers, despite everything we’ve learned from “The Devil Wears Prada.” This doesn’t mean that women are better managers than men, but that many of them are different because of how women have been socialized. Certainly most women managers are quite at odds



FACT. In reality, women are more often secretaries, teachers, maids, or hairdressers.

{PHOTO CREDITS FROM TOP: VANESSA VICK, REDUX; BOB BIRD, AP; DAVID J. PHILLIP, AP}

with the leathery, acid-tongued female law enforcement officers and other types so dominant in the media.

But if some think that females in power are more intimidating or unsympathetic or acerbic than men in power, it's not hard to see how these stereotypes are reinforced every day in the media. At the same time, all these confident, linguistically brawny women personify the assumption that, whether they deserved it or not, women have smashed through the glass ceiling. Who in their right mind would think there would ever be a need for a revitalized feminist politics with hard-bit-ten, flinty, successful women like these at the top?

Terry Who?

Women journalists in front of the camera versus women as experts and pundits on all issues

The success and prominence of certain women in television news—Katie Couric, Diane Sawyer, Gwen Ifill, Christiane Amanpour, Maria Bartiromo, Judy Woodruff—has certainly been a welcome change over the past 20 years. In 2007, women were 40.2 percent of the television news workforce. Nonetheless, significant inequities remain. In 2006, only 28 percent of the broadcast evening newscast stories were reported by women. In newspaper newsrooms, while women were 37 percent of the workforce in 2008 (and minority women were 17 percent), 65 percent of all supervisors were men, and they are also 58 percent of copy editors, 61 percent of reporters, and 73 percent of photographers.¹⁰

The preponderance of those hosting or featured on television talk shows are white men who have shown scant interest in the challenges facing working-class or lower-middle-class women in particular.

“Terry Who?” is Terry O’Neill, the president of the National Organization for Women, the largest women’s advocacy group in the United States. Yet where is she and other prominent women who would happily discuss the challenges of work

and life faced by women and men today on CNN, the network news, or other television talk shows? Women as news sources, experts, or commentators on these profound changes in our economy and society have been utterly marginalized. As a result, virtually unnoticed by the media are the enormous changes in family life wrought by massive male layoffs and more women becoming breadwinners; the increasing, pressing need for child care and quality after-school programs; and the persistence and consequences of pay inequity.

Importantly, the preponderance of those hosting or featured on television talk shows are white men who have shown scant interest in the challenges facing working-class or lower-middle-class women in particular. Men outnumbered women by a four-to-one ratio on the Sunday-morning talk shows in 2005 and 2006. Of the 35 hosts or co-hosts on the prime-time cable news programs, 29 were white men. As the Media Report to Women, an organization that covers women and the media, noted, “Women did not make up at least half of the guests on a single one of the three cable networks, and on some networks they comprised as little as 18 percent.”¹¹

Paris Hilton, all-American girl?

Images of young women as shallow, cat-fighting sex objects versus the real girls of America

The turn of the millennium marked a rise in television shows, movies, music videos, and magazines resurrecting sexist stereotypes of young women as little more than sex objects, defined first and foremost by their faces and bodies, as obsessed with boys, relationships, and finding Mr. Right, as addicted to shopping and defined by what they buy, and as shallow, materialistic twits who love getting into catfights with each other, especially over men. So we get TV shows about young women desperate to become the next “top model,” plastic surgery and makeover shows, “reality” TV shows about rich women desperate to stay young in Orange County, Atlanta, or New York, and celebrity magazines obsessed with “Who Wore it Better.”

Just a glance across the media landscape reveals these pervasive sexist images. Young women on MTV’s “The Real World” are categorized as “sluts,” “bitches” (including “the black bitch”), and party girls. Rap music videos—with the derogatory term “video ho’s”—reduce African American women to gyrating hootchie



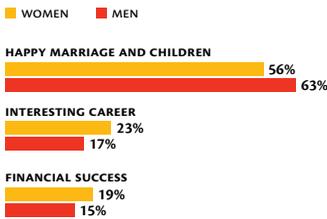


CLAIMING THE SPOTLIGHT. The success and prominence of certain women in television news—among them Katie Couric, Diane Sawyer, Christiane Amanpour, Gwen Ifill, and Lisa Ling—has been a welcome change over the past 20 years. In 2007, women were 40.2 percent of the television news workforce.

{PHOTO CREDITS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TODD HEISLER, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*; MARK PETERSON; RAMIN TALAIE, CORBIS; LAIF, REDUX; MARK LEONG, REDUX}

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: How would you rank these three things in importance for a daughter of yours?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

mamas. And the latest bachelor on “The Bachelor” is presented with 25 women he gets to sample until he chooses the one he likes best.

How did this happen, given the successes of the women’s movement and the understanding that sexism is reactionary? The chief culprit is the use of an arch irony—the deployment of the knowing wink that it’s all a joke, that we’re not to take this too seriously. Because women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, and now that full equality is allegedly complete, it’s OK, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.¹² After all, TV shows such as “Are You Hot?” or magazines like *Maxim* can’t possibly undermine women’s equality at this late date, right?

But the line this kind of media fare sells is that true power comes from getting men to lust after you and other women to envy you. Such representations reinforce the notion that a girl’s appearance is more important than her achievements or aspirations—not a very useful message in the real world of women as breadwinners.

These kinds of images also promote the notion that given these allegedly inherent female traits, girls may simply be unsuited for professional careers or positions of power. So images may have very real consequences on girls’ ambitions, especially girls from low- and medium-income families, on their notions of feasible career choices, and on their accepting being tracked into lower-paying, dead-end jobs. Research shows that after being exposed to certain sexist media fare that objectifies women, in a subsequent task girls choose not to assume leadership positions in team groups.¹³

Other studies show that after being required to focus on their bodies, girls do less well in certain kinds of cognitive tasks.¹⁴ And researchers also document that stereotypical imagery has a negative impact on what boys think girls and women can and cannot do.¹⁵ Indeed, another experiment shows that when applying for a managerial position, the women who appeared more sexy got rated as less competent and less intelligent than the more conservatively dressed applicants.¹⁶

The tensions between media fare and the lives and experiences of most everyday young white women and women of color couldn't be starker. The vast majority of ordinary young women in America cannot shop till they drop, do not like being objectified by boys, and will need to earn a living and be taken seriously at work.

Smart, hardworking, accomplished young women who care about ideas, politics, social justice, and their future careers are very few and far between in America's mass media, yet they are going to college in record numbers, and at some elite institutions getting a greater share of honors degrees than men.¹⁷

Back to June Cleaver?

Mothers "opting out" of the workplace versus mothers as breadwinners

Several years ago we were told that a big new trend was sweeping the land. According to an instantly infamous article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* from October 2003, women were now "opting out" of work.¹⁸ The cover headline asked "Q: Why Don't More Women Get to the Top? A: They Choose Not To." The subtitle read, "Abandoning the Climb and Heading Home." Reportedly the newspaper got more mail about this story, most of it hostile from furious women, than any other in recent history.¹⁹

The magazine article sparked intense debate at the time, yet ever since the debut of "the mommy track" in the early 1990s, the women of America have been subjected to these kinds of stories about mothers seeing the light and chucking it all for Junior's sake.

What made this particular piece distinct was a statistical blip that showed a small decline in the number of working mothers in the workforce. The article, written by Lisa Belkin, herself a former *New York Times* reporter who decided to quit and write freelance instead, cited the experiences of several highly privileged white women





How different it all is from, you know, the sort of media images that we have of the 1950s family where he would be the sole breadwinner and he'd give his wife an allowance. Now two people sit down and say, 'Here's how much money we're making, how are we gonna make these decisions together as a unit.' I think about how different that is.

Michael in Seattle

who were Princeton alums (as is Belkin). Their decision to “opt out” was then held up as a new, national trend embraced by all women of all races and classes.

The biggest problem with this and similar stories was the emphasis on “choice.” Supposedly sensible, devoted mothers who truly cared about their kids simply chose to “opt out.” But despite the headline, what we learned inside the article was that the first two women we met, one an attorney, the other a television reporter, were confronted with speed-up at work—55- to 75-hour weeks—at the same time they were having children. Both asked for shorter and more flexible hours and were turned down. Their “choice” was to maintain their punishing schedules or to quit. As one of these women admitted, “I wish it had been possible to be the kind of parent I want to be and continue with my legal career.”

The real story here was not about mothers “choosing” not to work. It was about the ongoing inhumanity of many workplaces whose workaholic cultures are hostile to men and women alike.

Then there was the old selective use of statistics. There was no empirical evidence at all that mothers were “opting out.”²⁰ The article emphasized findings from a recent survey in which 26 percent of women in senior management said they did not want a promotion. So that meant nearly three-quarters did. We then learned that *Fortune* reported that in a survey of 108 women in high-powered jobs, “at least 20” had chosen to leave. Doesn’t that mean that four-fifths have not made this “choice”?

Katha Pollitt of *The Nation*, Heather Boushey, then at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, and others debunked Belkin’s other statistical sleights of hand in the piece, which allowed her to overstate how many mothers were actually “opting out” of the workforce.²¹ In fact, the most interesting thing about the article was its buried lead. The real story here was not about mothers “choosing” not to work. It was about the ongoing inhumanity of many workplaces whose workaholic cultures are hostile to men and women alike. After all, there aren’t many women (and men) today who can afford to opt out of the

family-unfriendly rat race and have the financial strength to start their own businesses suited to their family needs.

At the same time, the standards for what constituted being a good-enough mother had become unattainable. There was the emergence of what Smith College professor Meredith Michaels and I termed “the new momism” in our book *The Mommy Myth*—the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.²²

The new momism is driven by fear, stoked by so many stories about missing children, dangerous products, and child care centers supposedly staffed by child molesters. It has also been driven by marketing, the desire to sell anxious mothers as many products as possible to protect their children from germs, and stoke their intellectual and physical development as early as possible—hence, piping Mozart into your womb while pregnant—and to sell magazines with such angst-producing headlines as:

“Are You a Sensitive Mother?”
“Is Your Child Eating Enough?”
“Is Your Baby Normal?”

No wonder 77 percent of mothers with children at home said they believe it’s harder to be a mother now than it was 20 or 30 years ago, and 50 percent felt mothers were doing a worse job today than mothers back then, according to a 1997 Pew Research Center poll.²³ Even mothers who deliberately avoid TV and magazines, or who pride themselves on seeing through them, have trouble escaping the standards of perfection, and the sense of threat, that the media ceaselessly atomize into the air we breathe.

While important websites such as Catalyst, MomsRising, Feministing and those for the National Organization for Women and the Feminist Majority all seek to address these issues at home and abroad, many user-generated sites and blogs such as *Adventures in Motherhood*, *Mothers & More*, and *Motherhood Uncensored*, to name only a few, focus disproportionately on motherhood, its challenges, its joys, and the need to confess one’s failings. This is powerful testimony to the tyranny of the new momism and women’s need to talk back to it and connect with each other in honest and mutually sustaining ways.



TOO EMOTIONAL. When Senator Hillary Clinton teared up during the New Hampshire primary, she was declared too emotional. {ELISE AMENDOLA, AP}

TOO HOT. Governor Sarah Palin suffered from sexist attention during the presidential campaign from conservative men who proudly called her a “hottie.” {LYNNE SLADKY, AP}

TOO ANGRY. When the media at first had no idea what to make of Michelle Obama, she was tagged as an “angry black woman.” {STEVE HELBER, AP}

Mothers, often isolated from one another because of geography or work patterns and forced to think of themselves as lone heroes (or failures), have found on the Internet a place where they can try to connect with each other and not feel so alone. The proliferation of all the “momoir” books and these online sites documents the struggle that mothers—including working mothers—face, how neglected they remain by our government, and the extent to which motherhood in particular remains the unfinished business of the women’s movement.²⁴

And it rhymes with witch...

The dismissive coverage of powerful, successful women versus their achievements

On top of all this, there are the representations of powerful women as impossible divas: greedy, unscrupulous, hated by their staffs, unloved by their families. Just think Miranda Priestly in “The Devil Wears Prada.” But what about the corporate thieves of Enron—Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, Andrew Fastow, and others—all

of whom bilked thousands of Enron employees and investors out of their life savings? These guys did not come in for the same ridiculing and schadenfreude-filled media coverage that Martha Stewart faced when she was charged with covering up an insider trading deal of far less shattering financial importance. Yes, it's true, the Enron boys weren't celebrities. But they also weren't women.

Let's consider how the media dealt with the three most important women in the 2008 presidential contest: Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama. Millions of women were outraged over the sexist coverage of Hillary Clinton during her presidential campaign. This smart and experienced U.S. senator was caricatured by a brigade of middle-aged, upper-middle-class white male commentators throughout the presidential primaries. Clinton was cast by white, male TV commentator Joe Scarborough as "very shrill."²⁵ And according to Tucker Carlson, she made men "involuntarily" cross their legs out of castration anxiety.²⁶ Glenn Beck cut to the chase and simply called her a bitch.²⁷ MSNBC's Chris Matthews asserted that the New York Senator got where she was only because people felt sorry for her because her husband cheated on her.²⁸

There are the representations of powerful women as impossible divas: greedy, unscrupulous, hated by their staffs, unloved by their families.

At first, Sarah Palin was spared such coverage. Indeed, in the wake of the commentary Senator Clinton received, it was verboten in the mainstream press to ask whether a mother of five, including a 4-month-old infant with Down's Syndrome, could run for and hold such a high office. But in the online world Governor Palin's many substantive and personal contradictions were the subject of immediate and intense ridicule from the left and lots of sexist attention from conservative men who proudly declared her a "hottie."

But after the election, former aides to her running mate, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), began leaking all sorts of innuendo. The Alaska governor thought Africa was a country, not a continent. She was a diva and had tantrums. She was difficult and uncooperative. She was suffering from postpartum depression. And that

The 2008 campaign was allegedly all about gender—at least on an individual basis—but collectively it wasn’t about gender at all. There was scant attention paid to how the health care crisis affects women and their families, the ongoing child care crisis, pay inequity, women’s health, or reproductive rights.

it was Palin, not her handlers, who insisted on a \$150,000 wardrobe makeover.²⁹ How much of this was true remains unclear, but it was all easy to believe because she was a woman, and an ambitious one at that.

And then there is our current first lady. For much of the 2008 campaign the media had no idea what to make of the elegant, Princeton- and Harvard-educated Michelle Obama (except, of course, her clothes and bare arms). But the stereotype of the “angry black woman” was so pervasive, so available, that Fox News, *National Review* and the Internet rumor mill had no trouble trying to pin it on her. Even *The New Yorker* magazine had its take on the stereotype, running its “fist-bump” cover, with Obama drawn in Black Panther garb with an assault rifle slung over her shoulder.³⁰ After Barack Obama’s inauguration, black journalist and talking head Juan Williams—juiced on the fumes of “The O’Reilly Factor”—referred to Mrs. Obama’s “militant anger” and described her as “Stokely Carmichael [a 1960s black activist]...in a dress.”³¹

Michelle Obama has had to pay dearly for the prevailing stereotype of black women as “angry,” domineering and emasculating, according to her hometown newspaper the *Chicago Tribune*. She went on daytime talk show “The View” to chat with its women cohosts, she read to schoolchildren, she planted the famous White House garden, she tended to her kids, she shopped at J. Crew. She became the “mom-in-chief.” By May 2009, her favorability ratings had soared to 72 percent, higher even than her husband’s.³²

The great irony of the 2008 campaign was that it was allegedly all about gender—at least on an individual basis—but collectively it wasn’t about gender at all. Between all the anxiety about Hillary Clinton’s cleavage and her tears during

the New Hampshire primary campaign, or how “hot” Sarah Palin was, or how angry Michelle Obama was, there was scant attention paid to how the health care crisis affects women and their families, the ongoing child care crisis, pay inequity, women’s health, or reproductive rights. The media were sexist to all three and in the process ignored what really matters to women and men in American today as they try to balance work and life.

Those “radical” feminists

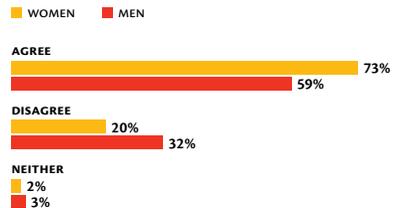
The demonization of feminism versus its importance to the well-being of men, women, and children

Feminism is now embedded in American life. The understanding that women can and should be able to hold the same jobs as men has led to TV shows such as “The Closer” and “Grey’s Anatomy.” At the very same time, feminism and feminists have been so thoroughly and effectively demonized in American society—Rush Limbaugh, for example, equating them with Nazis³³—that it is hard to think of a political group or movement that has had such a great impact on American life while at the same time being so discredited.

This rests on a new “common sense” in the media about the status of women. Allegedly, the women’s movement has been such a complete success that full equality with men is a fact, and so feminism is supposedly irrelevant now. Feminists have been stereotyped—in the news, books, movies, and television shows—as strident, humorless, deliberately unattractive, anti-family women who hate men and wish to make young women as unhappy as they are. Consequently, not only is feminism unnecessary because all its goals have supposedly been achieved,

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Do you agree or disagree: Today's women's movement is a movement that considers the needs of men and families, too, not just women?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

but also it is objectionable because it will make those who embrace it unattractive, unloved, and miserable.

In real life, of course, as Jessica Valenti, the co-founder of the website Feministing, put it, “The smartest, coolest women I know are feminists.”³⁴ Most feminists bear zero resemblance to the stereotype describe above. Just think Ellen DeGeneres, Geena Davis, Whoopi Goldberg, Barbara Ehrenreich, Wanda Sykes, Toni Morrison, Katha Pollitt, Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA), Margaret Cho, Billie Jean King, Isabel Allende, and Naomi Klein.

That may be the biggest challenge facing women today—to re-imagine and embrace collective action that cuts across the lines of race, class, and sexuality.

Similarly, in the everyday world most women display a feminist sensibility that detracts not at all from their humor, looks, outlook on life, or the workaday world they engage in. But this common sense about feminism keeps feminist voices and women’s issues out of much of the media. What dominates instead is a discourse of individualism—each woman is a product that she alone must make and shape. In this imagined world, any and all successes and failures are up to her and her alone—and so ingrained is this view that it is hard to imagine another model, another way of thinking.

And that may be the biggest challenge facing women today—to re-imagine and embrace collective action that cuts across the lines of race, class, and sexuality. This new, all-encompassing movement would hold the government, our workplaces and our educational, cultural, and religious institutions responsible for building a more just and humane society based on real equality.

Where do we go from here?

Women as mindless consumers, young women as airheads or enmeshed in cat-fights, powerful women as difficult and unloved and, yet, women who have cracked the glass ceiling, all appear on our nation’s media screens. But you note I have

not yet used the word “breadwinner” because that role, implying as it does active support of a family in multiple forms, is more absent from the media today than when “Cagney & Lacey” or “Roseanne” were on the air in the 1980s and 1990s.

Women as breadwinners today include low- and middle-income women as well as the upper-middle-income and wealthy women more often portrayed in the media. Women as breadwinners reminds us of the central economic role of African American, Hispanic and other minority women and low- and middle-income women in our economy. These women—the majority of us—are invisible, erased. And when

A DIFFERENT TAKE IN THE MEDIA. Ellen DeGeneres: one of the pioneers of daytime talk shows that really matter to women. {CHRIS PIZZELLO, AP}



women as breadwinners are not seen, our needs are not even acknowledged. That's why our media would be more reflective of real life and real work, and our society would be better off if we:

- Increase the presence of family-friendly and female experts in the news media
- Expose sexist media fare and promote media literacy among our youth
- Make the role of women as breadwinners more visible

To achieve these ends, I recommend that we work together to pressure the media much, much more than we have in the past, and the news media especially, to increase the presence of women, including experts on issues affecting women.

Where are the routine women's voices, backed by studies about pay inequity, health care, inadequate child care, homeless women and their families, on "Meet the Press" or CNN? This is a huge fight, given the stereotypes about feminists and the dismissing of women's issues.

We need to match the reality with the image of women as citizens and breadwinners and render visible what has been so effectively eclipsed.

Finally, we need to talk back to the media more. Let's remember that it was a group of high school girls in Pennsylvania, so outraged by the Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt for girls that read "Who needs brains when you have these?" that got the shirts removed from stores.³⁵ But this must also be a more sustained, long-term activity, involving the promotion of media literacy for children and fighting against the sexist stereotypes—and the advertisers who support them—that target young people. We would do well to trumpet the analysis of the Women's Media Center, the reporting of Women's eNews, and the pushback of Media Matters.

In short, we need to match the reality with the image of women as citizens and breadwinners and render visible what has been so effectively eclipsed. Pay inequity, dead-end jobs, sexual harassment, abuse of overtime pay, speed-up at work, out-of-date maternity leave policies, inadequate or nonexistent child care—these

are all burdens carried by tens of millions of women with minimal help or acknowledgment. And these are all problems that government, employers, and society can help overcome.

It's time for leaders across the country to emphasize the discrepancies between image and reality, and to get women's issues and a feminist perspective back in the media spotlight. Let's first consider these misleading images and the real lives of women, then identify the pressure points in the media where women and men together can apply humor and satire, and justified outrage whenever appropriate to chastise the overt and inadvertent stereotyping of women today.

And we should also identify when and where we can praise the media for giving voice to women's real needs and concerns. Because despite everything, the media do this too—just not often enough. This is one of main effects of today's media—by overemphasizing certain kinds of people, policies, values, and solutions, it makes imagining alternatives all the much harder. It is time for us to take on the current “common sense,” to smash it, and to dare the country and the media not to take us seriously.

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