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For Younger Women, Clinton Is No Martyr

By Laura Sessions Stepp
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I recently met with a group of high school and college women who had come to D.C. for a leadership conference. I wondered whether they felt -- as many women in my generation do -- that Hillary Clinton suffered in the Democratic presidential primary from rank bias against women. So I asked them: Did Clinton's sex play a part in her losing the nomination? And did her loss dissuade them or their girlfriends from wanting to pursue political careers?

Their answers were no and no.

On the first question, they thought Clinton lost on the issues. This was not women's loss; it was hers. On the second question, they're not disheartened. If anything, by almost winning, Clinton inspired them to work even harder to elect themselves or other young women.

Such reactions are a welcome contrast to the sour grapes of some older Democratic feminists in this post-primary season, with their Nobama slogans and threats to vote Republican in the general election. Don't get me wrong: Older women have been workhorses of the party for a long time; I understand the disappointment of coming so close to sending the first woman to the White House. But I'm also thankful that there are increasing numbers of young women like those I met at the Beacon Hotel who see more opportunities than barriers in their future.

Of all the reasons these young women gave for their optimism, the one they seemed most sure of was this: Many of their male friends and colleagues are largely gender-blind. These men, in such cities as Albuquerque, Houston and the District, will not hesitate to vote for a female candidate over a male, they said.

I hope they're right. But how many men are we talking about? And how does one explain a June poll of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters by the Pew Research Center, in which far more men ages 18 to 29 than women that age favored Barack Obama over Clinton?

That, the Beacon group said, was due to Obama's youthfulness, energy and promises to govern in a new way. Youth trumped sex, particularly for the guys.

High school activist Zen Keenen from Lincoln, Neb., voted for Obama in her state's February caucus. Before her vote, she said, "older women would come up and ask me, 'Why aren't you voting for a woman?' "

"I don't think of [Clinton] being a woman," Keenen said she replied. "I'm not voting for her because I don't agree with her views." Keenen also persuaded her mother to switch from Clinton to Obama.

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Keenen also gave a personal example of her views on gender blindness.

She served for two years on her high school theater board, an elective position, and "really wanted to be president my senior year." But she didn't run. Why? Because she knew the race would be a popularity contest, and another candidate, a male, was more popular than she. "It never was because he was a guy," she says.

Come on, an older woman might say. Maybe the guy was well-liked, but it also may be that her classmates could see a guy in that position more easily than they could see a girl. Bias wears many masks.

In the 1960s and '70s, some feminists would have urged Keenen to run anyway, just to make a point. So much of public discourse then revolved around gender politics. Men were the enemy or, at a minimum, uninterested in women's progress. There was plenty of evidence of sex discrimination in hiring, pay and promotion, and women felt they had to speak with one voice, loudly, to achieve anything approaching equity.

More women serve now in legislatures and sit on corporate boards -- not enough, for sure, but more than four decades ago. Perhaps politically active young women believe they no longer need to concentrate on women as a group but on the merits and weaknesses of individual candidates, not unlike the position that Rep. Jesse L. Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), son of the civil rights leader, takes regarding politically active African Americans.

Of course, some of these young women will become disenchanted as they get older. But it's impossible not to be inspired by people like Kristy Pagan, a 25-year-old education policy analyst on the Hill. In high school, Pagan ran for school president four times. She lost each race but did not lose her optimism and describes her current efforts as "creating a new system that promotes women at any stage of their lives, with men right there beside us."

Arguably such optimism may ease the path toward true equality. If women behave as though fairness is a given, it may encourage men to treat them as truly equal. By contrast, emphasizing sex, like emphasizing race, can lead to divisiveness and other reactions that hinder the progress that has been made.

Pagan takes part in the Public Leadership Educational Network, a national organization that trains young women. Rebecca Leet, PLEN's executive director, says the women who pass through the program "think a lot about process. They're real practical. . . . They want to learn how to write résumés, meet deans of graduate schools, intern on the Hill."

They're hopeful, says the 59-year-old Leet, in part because "we brought them up to believe they can do anything."

Leet has two daughters, both in their early 20s. She says they didn't perceive the anti-woman rhetoric that she sensed during Clinton's campaign.

She got angry in particular with media coverage and was not shy about sharing her opinions with them.

Their response? They rolled their eyes, she says, and said something like, "God, Mom, get over it."

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