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ABSTRACT

While investigating materials for a new course at City College of New York dealing with the rhetoric of women activists, women who were previously actively involved in the "political scene" were asked to respond to the question, "Does the fact that you are a woman affect the content, delivery, or reception of your ideas by the audiences you have addressed? If so, how? Women of diverse political and ethnic backgrounds replied. Although the responses were highly subjective, many significant issues were recognized that call for further investigation. While a number of women denied that sex plays any role in the impact of their ideas on audiences, others recognized the prejudices they face when delivering speeches. At the same time, some women who identified the obstacles conceded that these prejudices can often be used to enhance their ethos. One of the most significant points emphasized was that we may have reached a new national consciousness toward women politicians.
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HOW WOMEN IN POLITICS VIEW THE ROLE THEIR SEX PLAYS IN THE
IMPACT OF THEIR SPEECHES ON AUDIENCES

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The number of women elected to political office has indeed increased in the last few years. Yet, to my knowledge, there has been no recent study of how women in politics view the role that sex has played--and is playing--when they face audiences. Has their sex contributed to--or detracted from--their ethos? Do women in politics make any concessions to male chauvinism in the content or delivery of their speeches? Or do these women consider other factors more important than sex?

In an attempt to find answers to the above questions while investigating materials for a new course at The City College of New York dealing with the rhetoric of women activists, I wrote to women who are involved now (or were previously involved) in the political scene asking them to respond to the following: Does the fact that you are a woman affect the content, delivery, or reception of your ideas by the audiences you have addressed? If so, how?

Women of diverse political and ethnic backgrounds replied. Letters came from ten Congresswomen, two New York State Senators, three Assemblywomen, and four City Councilwomen.¹ In addition, former Senator Margaret Chase Smith, former Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce, Jean Westwood, and Frances Farenthold responded.

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And I was able to interview Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm and Miriam Kelber, who assists Congresswoman Bella Abzug with her speeches.

* Needless to say, the responses were as subjective as Rorschach tests, revealing a tremendous range in the writers' consciousness of women's position in our society. In as much as the questions were open ended, obviously, the results I am reporting cannot be considered hard data. But, nevertheless, many significant issues were recognized that call for further investigation.

* The majority of the women who responded concentrated on the role that sex plays in the reception of their ideas by audiences. A number of the women denied that sex had an effect on audiences; others acknowledged that sex does play a role in the impact of their ideas--sometimes positive, sometimes negative.

The impact of sex on the content of their speeches was noted by several women (Bella Abzug, Karen Burstein, Elizabeth Holtzman, and Jean Westwood) who said that they often handled "women's issues" in their speeches. In fact, Jean Westwood mentioned that "there often would be some surprise in mixed audiences at her command of other than women's issues."²

Delivery was stressed by only two of the women, however. It was Clare Boothe Luce who emphasized how women "consciously or unconsciously" make concessions to male chauvinism when delivering speeches. Luce's reply dealt primarily with delivery:

Apart from her intellectual equipment, the greatest asset a woman speaker can have is a low-pitched, pleasant voice. . . .

Another great asset to a woman speaker is a pleasant smile. It is remarkable how much more receptive audiences are to the content of a woman's speech, if she delivers it with a smile.

Women lecturers and speakers soon learn that male audiences are quickly put off by the pontifical, didactic, or "straight from the shoulder" styles of delivery that are easily permitted to men. Consciously or unconsciously, women know this, so a woman's style of delivery generally becomes more tentative, "modest" and non-authoritarian than a man's. Perhaps the floor of Congress is the only place where a woman may speak as forcefully as a man. However, even there, she will often encounter male prejudice, and the more forceful her delivery is, the more she will have to endure jibes from an unfriendly press, or her male colleagues, for being a "school-marm," or an "unfeminine" person.

For psychological reasons that you will have no difficulty adducing, women speakers who wish to convince male audiences try to avoid those physical gestures which seem to irritate men most--the clenching of fist on the rostrum to make a point, the shaking of an admonitory forefinger, the angry and portentous scowl, etc. No doubt adult men (unconsciously) associate all these gestures with the way Mama looked when she scolded her bad little boys. And this evokes irrational reactions in the male bosom of guilt, fear, or rejection. Silly, but understandable. . . . There is little doubt that women writers and speakers are given less "credibility" than men.³

Congresswoman Bella Abzug, ~~in~~ contrast, certainly does not make these concessions to male chauvinism when delivering her speeches! Abzug's aggressive style has often been criticized by those who support her and those who do not. Yet, I would venture to speculate that reactions to her delivery are not based on sex alone. After interrogating voters in the Congresswoman's New York audiences over the past several years, it seems to me that the criticisms she has aroused have been due in part to the fact that she is a Jew from New York. Both Jews and non-Jews who react negatively to Abzug's delivery seem to resent the "pushy, New York Jewish mama" image she projects.

Although I do not know what Congresswoman Abzug's own reaction to my speculation would be, Miriam Kelber, her assistant did not agree that Abzug's ethnic background has a negative impact on audiences. Even though Kelber conceded that TV cameramen often focus on Abzug's clenched fist, Kelber cited the respectful treatment of Abzug by out-of-town newspapers (when she delivers speeches in small towns in the Mid-West) as evidence of the lack of prejudice against her because of her ethnic background.⁴

While Kelber's statement is hardly sufficient evidence to destroy my speculation, the point should be made that many voters are not "turned off" by Abzug's aggressive delivery even though members of the male Establishment in Congress might be. Yet, a forceful delivery on the part of women politicians is often admired even by males, according to Congresswoman Patsy Mink. The Congresswoman from Hawaii wrote that the impression she receives from a predominantly male audience is that "they expect a woman speaker

to be shy and submissive" but added that "they are surprised to hear anyone who speaks forcefully, and are probably more receptive as a result." Mink insisted that her style of delivery is her own and is "not tailored to fit" her sex.⁵

Most interesting were the comments by the women who dealt with the various ways in which the reception of their ideas by audiences was affected. For example, the newly-elected New York State Senator Carol Bellamy wrote: "In many cases audiences take less seriously a woman's presentation on a matter."⁶ Frances ("Sissy") Farenthold (who came in second when nominated for Vice President at the Democratic Convention this past summer) indicated that at the beginning of her campaign for Governor of Texas in 1972, her sex did affect the reception of her speeches. "After a while, however, the 'ice broke'" and she "did not detect it any longer."⁷

Several of the women, who recognized the difficulties they face when addressing audiences, argued that their sex contributes to their ethos and has been, at times, an asset. This is particularly so, according to Congresswoman Mink, when a woman is the principal speaker at an association banquet. She wrote that "the 'different' or 'unique' quality of a woman speaker in a role more frequently given to a man . . . may capture more interest and attention."⁸ Congresswoman Margaret Heckler from Massachusetts stressed how the prejudice women politicians face when appearing before audiences can be used:

I am almost always conscious that the audience is having a certain reaction to me because I am a woman. For one thing, they are not necessarily expecting either great substance or great eloquence. By pre-conditioning, I suppose, they are, in sum, not expecting a good speech.

Heckler considers this prejudice "an advantage, and, being conscious of the pre-disposition," attempts to "give as inspiring a speech" as she can.⁹ Former Chairwoman of the Democratic Party Jean Westwood, who mentioned that "there often would be some surprise in mixed audiences at [her] command of other than women's issues," admitted that the audience's initial surprise was often helpful in getting their attention and sometimes getting a better reception because of that attention." She further stated: "Frankly, I also found it possible to do some more emotional speeches than some men could have made."¹⁰ And New York State Senator Carol Bellamy felt that "audiences are more impressed by the ability of a woman to present a major concise statement since they are less disposed to expect such from a woman as from a man."¹¹

On the other hand, a number of the respondents denied that being a woman plays any role in their impact on audiences, and others did not consider my question valid. Congresswomen Leonor Sullivan from Missouri, Ella Grasso from Connecticut, Julia Hansen from Washington, and New York State Assemblywoman Rosemary Gunning were most emphatic in their denials.¹² Former Senator Margaret Chase Smith stressed that "women are people" and that her speeches

"have been written and delivered on that basis."¹³ New York City Councilwoman Carol Greitzer found that "people listen to an elected official if they respect that official" and that sex is not a factor.¹⁴ Congresswoman Marjorie Holt from Maryland considered "individuality" more important than sex but did admit that "frequently people tend to listen more carefully" just because she is a woman.¹⁵ Barbara Jordan, the newly-elected Black Congresswoman from Texas, refused to "speculate about the reactions of audiences" to her remarks and stated, "I call things as I see them."¹⁶ But it was the newly-elected Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder from Denver who topped the previous reactions with her quip that she did not know what her content, delivery, or reception would be if she were a male!¹⁷

Several factors other than sex were emphasized by two of the women. Councilwoman Barbara Mikulski, who represents the interests of the poor white ethnic voters in Baltimore, wrote: "I think that my content and delivery is based on not so much a factor of my sexuality but because of my ethnicity and social class."¹⁸ And youth was noted as a factor by the newly-elected New York State Senator Karen Burstein when she commented as follows: "I hear much more often sighs of wonder that anyone so young could know anything significant than I hear comment on a female's capacity to think."¹⁹

While Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm agreed with many of the statements made by other women politicians, she discussed the questions I asked in greater depth during my fifteen-minute

interview with her on February 2, 1973. She conceded that her "femaleness has something to do" with the impact she has on audiences, but did not think her "femaleness is everything." Far more important, in her judgment, is the fact that she is a "unique politician" who does not believe in "political expediency" and who is "representative of a new breed of politics." She stressed that her ethos is primarily due to the sincerity and integrity she projects; these are the main factors that have enabled her to overcome the "twin obstacles of racism and sexism." (At one point in the interview, however, she did say that being Black is often an asset to a politician today and has been for her.)

Nevertheless, Chisholm made the point that being a woman generates a great deal of interest because voters feel that as a woman politician she is not "given as much as men are to constant machinations and maneuverings." To support this contention, the Congresswoman from Brooklyn related conversations with poor white Southern farmers during her campaign for the Presidency. These men said they were supporting her because they were tired of the usual crooked politicians. When I asked her if she was supported by Black males, she stated that she was but not by "Black politicians." (She thought that jealousy might have been a factor in her rejection by Black politicians.)

To further emphasize the extent of her appeal to the average voter because of her willingness to speak out "forcefully and

assertively" on issues without fear of endangering her political career, she quoted (but would not name) a candidate for the Presidency who, after appearing on a nation-wide television program with her, said that if Chisholm had sufficient funds for her campaign, "a lot of us would have to run and hide for cover."

Even Congressmen, she felt, give her a consideration that is not often granted to other speakers in Congress; when Chisholm walks to the well of the House to address them, they give her their undivided attention. She speculated on the reason for this. It might be that Congressmen are afraid of what the Congresswoman from Brooklyn might say, and, although they do not always agree with her, they do listen. As she put it, Congressmen do not consider "Chisholm a light-hearted woman on an ego trip."²⁰

Listening to Congresswoman Chisholm during the interview, I was struck by the fact that she is a woman politician with exceptional strength and charisma, a strong ego, a vivid speaking style, and the ability to relate to both sexes as well as to various ethnic and age groups. And I asked myself if women politicians have to be superwomen to appeal to audiences? I wondered whether women in politics have to work harder to establish their ethos than men do? Or are "ethnicity and social class," as Councilwoman Mikulski expressed it, more significant factors than sex today? If the latter statement is true, how explain why State Senator Burstein, a young white Jewish woman, polled more votes in many New York City suburban Black areas than did Robert Johnson, a Black minister?²¹ Was Burstein's youth a factor,

as she herself mentioned? And did Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman's youth, rather than her sex, play a decisive role in the defeat of Emanuel Celler in Brooklyn?

To find answers to the questions raised in this inquiry, we would have to conduct in depth studies of audience reactions to speeches by both male and female politicians in the same districts, voting patterns, etc. Moreover, it would be necessary to study women who ran and were not elected and, also, the women who were not even given an opportunity to run by those in control of local political clubs.

Yet, gathering data will be extremely difficult. There are so many variables in the art of political public speaking--and many different psychological, sociological, and historical factors. Some of the problems involved in collecting "objective evidence" are highlighted in the concluding remarks of State Senator Burstein's letter:

In sum, then, my being a woman has affected my capacity to communicate thoughts and commitment only in subtle ways. At the beginning of my political career, my sex may have rendered me less weighty a political being; at this point, because of interest in the women's movement, it perhaps works to my advantage. I must add that while objective evidence and the perceptions of my friends assure me that I am a successful, creative, idea-generating speaker, I believe, on a level no objective data can touch, that so long as most women continue to be treated in unserious ways, that my value, and seriousness, are not regarded as equal to that of my male colleagues.²²

Nevertheless, even this limited investigation I have reported suggests that while a number of women denied that sex plays any role in the impact of their ideas on audiences, others recognized the prejudices they face when delivering speeches. But, at the same time, some, among those who identified the obstacles, conceded that these prejudices can often be used to enhance their ethos.

One of the most significant points, however, was stressed by Congresswoman Chisholm. Her remarks suggest that notwithstanding the traditional negative attitudes toward women in politics that have been a part of our culture, we may have reached a new level in our national consciousness. Many voters are becoming disillusioned with the ordinary run of politicians (most of whom are men) and their political rhetoric. It would seem then that some of these voters are now willing to listen to women politicians who have integrity, intellect, strength, and charisma--women who might be able to right the wrongs of a society that has been controlled by male politicians. This same point was also emphasized by Congresswoman Holtzman when she wrote:

I share the conviction that women have a special role to play in Congress, especially in redirecting our national priorities. . . . people do not conceive of a woman as a "politician" and as a result, they are more receptive to her views and more eager to believe in her sincerity.²³

Not unexpectedly, it was Congresswoman Bella Abzug who, when describing her own impact on audiences, summed up the unique role that women in politics could play. She wrote that she likes to think audiences see her "as a woman who cares about peace, about the needs of our cities, about the needs of women, etc." People tell Abzug that they "may not agree with her" but feel that she has "deep feelings" about what she says and is ready to fight for what she believes. "People," the New York Congresswoman concluded, "respect commitment."²⁴

If voters today are beginning to identify not only Abzug and Chisholm with commitment, but other women politicians as well, then the words of the ex-slave Sojourner Truth at the Woman's Rights Convention of 1851 are relevant for our time as well:

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them.²⁵

But will they? Granted that many voters are ready to believe the rhetoric of women politicians, will the male politicians in the Establishment permit women to turn the world right side up again? And if men eventually accept women as equal partners in the political Establishment, what will happen to the women? Will they become corrupted by power and lose their ethos as many of the male politicians have? Or will women decide to leave the political arena as Shirley Chisholm recently indicated she would?

Future studies of the role sex plays in the impact of speeches by women politicians will undoubtedly have to deal with these questions.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Congresswomen Bella Abzug (New York City), Ella T. Grasso (Connecticut), Julia B. Hansen (Washington), Margaret M. Heckler (Massachusetts), Marjorie S. Holt (Maryland), Elizabeth Holtzman (New York City), Barbara Jordan (Texas), Patsy Mink (Hawaii), Patricia Schroeder (Colorado), and Leonor K. Sullivan (Missouri); New York State Senators Carol Bellamy and Karen Burstein; New York State Assemblywomen Constance E. Cook and Rosemary R. Gunning; Assemblywoman Ann Klein (Trenton); New York City Councilwomen Carol Greitzer, Ruth Lerner, and Muriel Stromberg; Councilwoman Barbara Mikulski (Baltimore).

² Letter from Jean M. Westwood, January 18, 1973.

³ Letter from Clare Boothe Luce, August 25, 1971.

⁴ Interview with Miriam Kelber in Bella Abzug's office, 252 Fifth Avenue, New York City, March 1, 1973.

⁵ Letter from Patsy T. Mink, January 23, 1973.

⁶ Letter from Carol Bellamy, January 31, 1973.

⁷ Letter from Frances Tarlton Farenthold, January 17, 1973.

⁸ Mink, op. cit.

⁹ Letter from Margaret M. Heckler, February 6, 1973.

¹⁰ Westwood, op. cit.

¹¹ Bellamy, op. cit.

¹² Letters from: Leonor K. (Mrs. John B.) Sullivan, January 10, 1973; Ella T. Grasso, January 17, 1973; Julia Butler Hansen, January 19, 1973; Rosemary R. Gunning, March 15, 1973.

- 13 Letter from Margaret Chase Smith, January 3, 1973.
- 14 Letter from Carol Greitzer, March 8, 1973.
- 15 Letter from Marjorie S. Holt, February 21, 1973.
- 16 Letter from Barbara Jordan, January 23, 1973.
- 17 Letter from Patricia Schroeder, January 12, 1973.
- 18 Letter from Barbara A. Mikulski, February 6, 1973.
- 19 Letter from Karen S. Burstein, February 12, 1973.
- 20 Interview with Shirley Chisholm in her District Office,
1149 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, N.Y., February 2, 1973.
- 21 New York Post, November 11, 1972, p. 25.
- 22 Burstein, op. cit.
- 23 Letter from Elizabeth Holtzman, February 15, 1973.
- 24 Letter from Bella S. Abzug, March 5, 1973.
- 25 Quoted in Miriam Schneir (ed.), Feminism: The Essential
Historical Writings (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 95.