



## **Sexism in Politics 2016: What can we learn so far from media portrayals of Hillary Clinton and Latin American female leaders?**

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The history of sexism within the United States runs deep. While the United States seems to be ranked as one of the top nations in terms of its military, technology, and GDP, it still struggles with its social issues in terms of race, economic disparity, and gender inequality. After the efforts of the women's rights movement in the 1970s, women still seem to face discrimination in the workplace, on national television, or simply during their every day lives in regards to their gender. Today, women still struggle to express their ideas without being targeted for their sex or having it rejected by a male counterpart. The unity and support for women grew drastically in the United States with the breaking of societal, gendered barriers including appointing female CEO's, talented female athletes receiving high distinction, and most recently women entering combat. This year, the United States will face the strong possibility of electing a female candidate as President of the United States—a bold move that has already been achieved by many of its allies.

While the United States remains conflicted in electing a new female leader, countries in Latin America already have elected female presidents and are examining the legacies of such female leaders. Figures like Dilma Rousseff and Michelle Bachelet are recognized as the forerunners of guerrilla movements dedicated to ending the reign of military dictatorships in order to establish a democracy in their country. While female leaders in other Latin American countries have not always taken part in political demonstrations, they have worked nearly twice as hard as their male counterparts in order to gain the positions they have today. According to *The Economist's* "Wonder Women and Macho Men," women in Latin America are recorded as now spending more years in school than men, which suggests that their prospects and leadership skills will improve. Women have also climbed up the corporate ladder and became leaders within some of the world's largest energy companies, including Brazilian energy company Rede Energia and online retailer B2W.<sup>1</sup> Although the glass-shattering achievement of electing a woman into an executive office position has been achieved by multiple countries, there still remains discomfort in the general population of being able to trust a female leader. This includes women enacting legislation, handling foreign policy, and holding powerful public

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<sup>1</sup> "Wonder Women and Macho Men." *The Economist*. August 22, 2015. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21661800-latin-american-women-are-making-great-strides-culture-not-keeping-up-wonder-women-and>.

offices in the government. Based on the observations of the media's portrayal of Hillary Clinton's campaign, and of other high-profiled female presidents in the Americas, sexism has manifested itself through social media as an advanced form of expression and continues to be reinforced in society.

## **Hillary Clinton – the United States**

Hillary Clinton has been the target of sexism since she launched her presidential campaign in 2016. Facing critiques on themes ranging from the tone of her voice to the outfits she wears to her interactions with her husband, Clinton has been constantly attacked on a personal level. Female critics argue that during the 2016 democratic debates, Clinton received questions that were much more difficult to respond to than those addressed to her male counterparts. In the Univision Democratic Debate on March 9, Clinton received questions from Jorge Ramos regarding deportation policies, her response to the attacks in Benghazi, Libya in 2012, and the handling of her email account. Since the Benghazi attack, Clinton has been the scapegoat for many politicians and analysts. Her interpretation of the situation was severely critiqued, and so was her sending of the video to her daughter. When forced to address whether she would drop out of the race if the Justice Department's investigation led to an indictment, she responded, "Oh for goodness – that's not going to happen. I'm not even going to answer that question."<sup>2</sup> Questions like these regarding the use of her personal email account and the possibility of being prematurely removed from the race may derive from deep societal misgivings towards having a woman running for an executive position. The intention of the questions was to appeal to Clinton's fears in order to shift her focus away from the presidency. Because none of the other male candidates had any executive office experience, she is critiqued on a different level than that of her other opponents. Her decision to respond to emails regarding Secretary of State information using her private email account should not be of such major concern for the elections. Many previous Secretaries of State, like John Kerry and Colin Powell, have also switched from using the Secretary of State email to using a personal email server that was under a firewall, too difficult to crack.<sup>3</sup> However, they have not been scrutinized severely by the public and office officials. Critiques of the candidate from daytime morning television shows and political talk shows have generated attention through the spread of social media comments. In a video created by *Huffington Post* tracking men's commentary on Clinton's vocal tone, male critics accuse her of "yelling" while suggesting that she should smile

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<sup>2</sup> Laslo, Matt. "Democratic Debate: It's Painful to Watch Clinton and Sanders Go at Each Other | Matt Laslo." *The Guardian*. March 10, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/10/democratic-debate-painful-watch-clinton-sanders-go-at-each-other>.

<sup>3</sup> Parsons, Christi, and Michael A. Memoli. "Hillary Clinton's Use of Private Email Not Unusual, but Still Raises Questions." *Los Angeles Times*. March 03, 2015. Accessed June 16, 2016.  
<http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/politicsnow/la-pn-hillary-clinton-emails-20150303-story.html>.

more during her speeches.<sup>4</sup> These critics even joke that Hillary will not receive male voters because of her tone being similar to men's "nagging wives" and reminiscent of the "lecture[s]" they receive from women in general.<sup>5</sup>

The clear undertone behind each of these comments were that the male critics were and are still challenged by Clinton's poise when giving speeches and taking part in Democratic debates. Her passion was misinterpreted as "yelling," while her serious demeanor was equated with strictness or anger. Although it is known for men to express this kind of anger, these male commentators expect Clinton to express her passion with a softer tone of voice, a common outlook that conflicts with women's own expectations in society today. This reveals how men in politics often are misguided in understanding sexism, leading their ignorance and own gender stereotype to emerge in the media or social networking sites. When such commentary generates outrage or backlash, they would be forced to address the issue since their career is put to the test but, at the same time, they would not understand that their commentary further continues the typical gender norms that society tries to break free from. While Clinton receives critiques for her campaign style, her counterparts, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, are also critiqued in terms of their platforms, responses to questions, and comments about their character by other presidential candidates. Only Sanders has rightfully agreed on the sexist comments made towards Clinton during election saying, "I can't think of many personalities who have been attacked for more reasons than Hillary Clinton. I don't know that a man would be treated the same way that Hillary is."<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump has also accused Hillary of playing the "Women's Card", a term used to assert that sexism against women is a tool used to exploit sexist attitudes, in a devaluing of her recent victories in several states.<sup>7</sup> While the "Women's Card" remains controversial in society, Trump takes his explanation a step further by appealing to male voters saying, "She's going — did you hear that Donald Trump raised his voice while speaking to a woman. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I mean all of the men — we're petrified to speak to women anymore; we may raise our voice."<sup>8</sup> Trump seems to be using it to unite men against Clinton to warn that women are now more likely to become "aggressive" by "shouting" and not listen to what their male colleagues say. Of course, as popular culture has agreed through their use of the term "mansplaining," when a man raises his voice over a woman to get his point across, this is

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<sup>4</sup> Wing, Nick. "Male Pundits To Hillary Clinton: Quiet Down And Smile More." The Huffington Post. March 15, 2016. Accessed May 09, 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/male-pundits-hillary-clinton\\_us\\_56e8bc99e4b086of99daecf6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/male-pundits-hillary-clinton_us_56e8bc99e4b086of99daecf6).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hensch, Mark. "Sanders: Some Hillary Critics Are 'sexist'" TheHill. August 09, 2015. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/250677-sanders-some-hillary-critics-are-sexist>.

<sup>7</sup> Gearan, Anne, and Katie Zezima. "Trump's 'woman's Card' Comment Escalates the Campaign's Gender Wars." Washington Post. April 27, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-womans-card-comment-escalates-gender-wars-of-2016-campaign/2016/04/27/fbe4c67a-0c2b-11e6-8ab8-9ad05of76d7d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trumps-womans-card-comment-escalates-gender-wars-of-2016-campaign/2016/04/27/fbe4c67a-0c2b-11e6-8ab8-9ad05of76d7d_story.html).

<sup>8</sup> Khalid, Asma. "Is Donald Trump Playing The 'Man Card'?" NPR. May 10, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/10/477423028/is-donald-trump-playing-the-man-card>.

not the case.<sup>9</sup> Generally, women have been expressing their own opinions in politics. However, their male counterparts fail to adequately listen to their approach causing some men to raise their voices or reiterate their opinions in order to drown out their female counterparts. This clearly pushes the gendered stereotype that women must always agree with the man's point of view rather than having their own, a mindset that pushes society away from gender equality. As Clinton remains the likely Democratic Presidential nominee, it remains unclear if the United States is prepared to deal with a First Lady as its first female President.

### **Dilma Rousseff – Brazil**

Dilma Rousseff, first female President of Brazil, remained popular during the first term of her presidency partially due to the economic prosperity left over from her predecessor's economic program *Bolsa Familia*, the exemption of federal tax of consumer basket products (essential food items), and the reduction of federal tax in the energy bill. However, during her second term, she failed to sustain the economy, allowing Brazil to enter one of its worst recessions, resulting in a very low popularity rating, falling below 10 percent. The Brazilian Supreme Court has also accused her of manipulating accounts through loans from the public banks that have enhanced the budget surplus and is currently awaiting trial. When the Chamber of Deputies, Brazil's lower house, voted in favor of continuing the impeachment process of Rousseff in the Senate, many of the officials in the overwhelmingly male chamber celebrated by holding premade posters with the slogan "*Tchau, querida!*" (Bye, love!)\*. The phrase demonstrates their lack of respect for the president even though her allegations are not deemed as impeachable by those in favor of democracy in Brazil, as stated in a recent [COHA](#) report. As the proceedings continued, one of Brazil's magazines, *IstoÉ*, critiqued the female president as delusional, including false information claiming that she took prescription medication and swore thus labeling her as emotionally unstable.<sup>10</sup> As a result, several other magazine sources and activists picked up on the article's inappropriateness and attacked it for its blatant sexism and absurd references. Dilma is well aware of the sexism present in the criticisms she receives from the Chambers of Deputies, the Senate, and numerous political parties. In fact, she argues that the majority of the criticisms, including one that referred to her as "harsh," are a direct result of her gender.<sup>11</sup> Dilma's case is not the only example of sexism towards politicians in Brazilian media. Michel Temer's wife has also fallen victim to sexist comments in a *Veja* article headlined "Marcela Temer: bela, recatada, e 'do lar'" (Marcela Temer: Beautiful, Maiden like,

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<sup>9</sup> Merriam Webster. "Mansplaining." Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>.

<sup>10</sup> Pardellas, Sergio, and Débora Bergamasco. "Uma Presidente Fora De Si." *IstoÉ*. April 01, 2016. Accessed May 31, 2016. [http://istoe.com.br/450027\\_UMA-PRESIDENTE-FORA-DE-SI/?pathImagens=&path=&actualArea=internalPage](http://istoe.com.br/450027_UMA-PRESIDENTE-FORA-DE-SI/?pathImagens=&path=&actualArea=internalPage).

<sup>11</sup> Shoichet, Catharine E. "Brazil's President: 'I Will Be Very Sad' If I Miss the Olympics." CNN. April 28, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/27/americas/brazil-president-dilma-rousseff-amanpour-interview/>.

and “A Housewife”).<sup>\*12</sup>The tabloid paints the picture of Marcela Temer as a woman who has nothing else to offer besides the role of a typical household wife, which is clearly not true. While she and many Brazilian women do not specialize in politics, there are other achievements for which each woman is worth being recognized. When the Senate voted in favor of continuing with Dilma’s impeachment trial, Vice President Temer assumed the executive post and filled his cabinet with white, wealthy, elite men, causing outrage among Brazil’s diverse population.<sup>13</sup> This decision by the interim president caused Brazil to fall 22 points from position 85 to position 107 in the Global Index of Gender Inequality, a composite measure that captures the loss of achievement within a country due to gender inequality, making the country fall among the ranks of other developing countries including Brunei, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Hungary, and Slovakia.<sup>\*14</sup> In a country with so much diversity, Temer decided to adopt a homogeneous cabinet, a drastically different version of Dilma’s cabinet. While the achievements of Dilma’s party, the Workers Party, seem to have moved the country forward, the decisions Temer has set forth for the country adds to the sense that Brazil is moving backwards in time.

### **Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Michelle Bachelet, and Laura Chinchilla – Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica**

Despite her success in legalizing gay marriage, introducing a universal health care plan that boosted school attendance and reduced poverty, Kirchner still remained a target for the media as well as rival politicians who wished to see her take a more aggressive approach on Argentinian foreign policy. In 2012, *Noticia*, a tabloid news magazine, released an article entitled “Cristina’s Pressure” and had a caricature of the Argentine president with “her head thrown back, her mouth open” making her seem as if she was “mid-orgasm” along with a slogan saying, “Every day she seems more confident, sensual and even shameless.”<sup>15</sup> The media has been known to attack Kirchner on the basis of her looks rather than her accomplishments while in office. During her first election success, she was accused of being cold and distant, rather than being warm and open which she attempted to change the night after her re-election by inviting

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<sup>12</sup> Sims, Shannon. "The Hilarious Feminist Backlash To Brazil's Impeachment Fallout." *Forbes*. April 20, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/shannonsims/2016/04/20/the-hilarious-feminist-backlash-to-brazils-impeachment-fallout/?ss=leadership-leaders#3359c5ad59fa>.

<sup>13</sup> Sims, Shannon. "Brazil's New President Michel Temer Fills Cabinet With Only White Men." *Forbes*. May 12, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/shannonsims/2016/05/12/brazils-new-president-michel-temer-fills-cabinet-with-only-men/#693f423c40c6>.

<sup>14</sup> Wentzel, Marina. "Sem Ministras, Brasil Perde 22 Posições Em Ranking De Igualdade De Gênero." *BBC Brasil*. May 25, 2016. Accessed June 16, 2016. [http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-36355724?ocid=socialflow\\_facebook](http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-36355724?ocid=socialflow_facebook).

<sup>15</sup> Wonder Women and Macho Men." *The Economist*. August 22, 2015. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21661800-latin-american-women-are-making-great-strides-culture-not-keeping-up-wonder-women-and>.

kids onto the stage to celebrate her win.<sup>16</sup> Once again, there is an application of societal feminine values reinforced on female officials. While it is inaccurate for her to be described as cold and distant, it shows how a male dominated mindset continues to interpret Kirchner and other female candidates as evil or emotionless instead of humble. Adding to the damage, Kirchner received nicknames from the wealthy class such as “Botox Evita” and “Bimbo.”<sup>17</sup> She publicly acknowledged the fact that she loves to maintain her looks: “I’ve always got dressed up, caked on the make-up. Would I have to dress like I was poor in order to be a good political leader?”<sup>18</sup> Her honest statement highlights the scrutiny female politicians face based on their looks. In a society where perfection is key, especially in terms of physical features, women are ultimately pressured to conform to societal expectations of what a woman should look like and how she should act when representing the nation. While Kirchner remains a champion for the middle class and the poor, she is still dissected under the public eye based on her fiery speeches, her expression in her outfits, and her appeal to the larger global audience.

Michelle Bachelet took a progressive position by participating in guerilla groups dedicated to implementing democracy in a developing Chile. Since she became the first woman in office in 2014, many Chilean women have been more proactive in their societal demands. However, women are continuously reminded of Chile’s societal chauvinism by media portrayals of Bachelet. In the streets, local Chileans reference her as “*La Gordis*” (“the fat woman”) and a magazine has labeled her as a “Baywatch babe” after finding a picture of her in a swimsuit.<sup>19</sup> The Finance Minister, Nicholas Eyzaguirre, even referenced her as “*mi gordi*” (“my fat woman”) in an interview with *La Tercera* but later apologized, acknowledging the machismo undertones within his statement.<sup>20</sup> Within the political field, Bachelet’s opponents fail to recognize her intentions as consensus-building and inclusive. Instead, they find her to be making “commissions” instead of “making decisions.”<sup>21</sup> Many male politicians who are challenged by the authority of a woman continue to display immaturity and react unreasonably towards her progress in improving the country. So far, under her administration, her economic policies have helped the Chilean economy rebound from entering a recession. She provided social programs

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<sup>16</sup> D.R. "Wonder Women and Macho Men." *The Economist*. October 24, 2011. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21661800-latin-american-women-are-making-great-strides-culture-not-keeping-up-wonder-women-and>.

<sup>17</sup> Goni, Uki. "Cristina Kirchner: She's Not Just Another Evita | Profile." *The Guardian*. February 04, 2012. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2012/feb/05/observer-profile-cristina-kirchner-argentina>.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas White International. "Global Players." *Thomaswhite.com*. August 2009. Accessed May 27, 2016. <http://www.thomaswhite.com/global-perspectives/cristina-fernandez-de-kirchner-president-argentina/>.

<sup>19</sup> Balch, Oliver. "Michelle Bachelet: The Cultural Legacy of Chile's First Female President." *The Guardian*. December 13, 2009. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/13/michelle-bachelet-chile-president-legacy>.

<sup>20</sup> Emol. "Eyzaguirre Le Pide Disculpas a Bachelet Por Lllamarla "mi Gordi"" *Emol*. August 22, 2005. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.emol.com/noticias/nacional/2005/08/22/192982/eyzaguirre-le-pide-disculpas-a-bachelet-por-llamarla-mi-gordi.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*.

(i.e. “Chile Grows with You” in 2009), funded pension reforms, and developed a stimulus package to create jobs. While the stimulus package reduced poverty in the country, she also focused on improving childhood education through a program called, “I Choose my PC” in March 2009, where poor seventh graders with high achievement performance were rewarded free laptops to continue their learning. As a result of her efforts, she was appointed as first executive director of UN Women, a branch of the United Nations focusing on empowering women. Because of all these achievements, it seems understandable that Michele Bachelet would be the model that Chilean women seem to follow in order to continue change throughout their country. The biggest challenge Bachelet faces today is a corruption case against her family members and student protests as a result of her unkept promise to make universities free. Her future actions will determine whether or not she will continue to follow her proposed projects for the country and prove to contenders that she is still able to handle the presidency amidst all the pressure around her.

While the majority of the women in this analysis have pushed through controversial bills increasing the civil liberties of the LGBT community and women, several still hold onto the traditional values that were instilled in their country. For example, Costa Rica’s first female president, Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014), has been praised for her handling of the border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, where she filed with the International Court of Justice against Nicaragua’s decision to reclaim the Islands in the San Juan Delta, even though she had received mixed international criticism for her stances on abortion, same-sex marriage, and the separation of church and state. Women have evaluated her as someone who “doesn’t really like women,” or is “anti-woman” although this is not the case either.<sup>22</sup> Her focus has been on the economy (encouraged by biotechnology, organic agriculture, aerospace and aviation industries), and she also acknowledges the fact that she is representing the many women of Costa Rica and openly supports the progress of women by stating, “They say in a macho way that only men can lead. No way. We women can do it too.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While a third of the world has already experienced an administration with a female in the executive position, the other two-thirds are challenged to meet that criteria and continue their efforts to eradicate the sexism that can be found within their local media and politics. Although this does not necessarily mean that one-third of the world is perfect, there should still be room for improvement on making sure women receive a strong representation in politics rather than one that mocks their credibility or undermines their knowledge. The source of sexism continues to be society reinforcing the pre-conceived roles women have been subjected

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<sup>22</sup> Samhita. "Feministing." *Feministing*. Accessed June 16, 2016.

<http://feministing.com/2010/02/12/laura-chinchilla-first-female-president-of-costa-rica-doesnt-really-like-women/>.

<sup>23</sup> Global Post. "Costa Rica: A Woman in Charge?" *GlobalPost*. May 04, 2010. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/costa-rica/100204/laura-chinchilla-elections>.

to and forced within. As a result, once these pre-conceived thoughts are applied through the media, it continues to manifest, encouraging others to continue the degrading act which takes away from the real issues at hand. While one may be so quick to assume that men are the ones behind the sexism, it is actually both men and women who are equally to blame, revealing a disconnect in society's expectation to assess both genders equally. If society is serious about combating sexism, especially in politics, one step would be to define women in terms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century accomplishments they have made towards society's progress while encouraging other women to continue their lead in the future.<sup>24</sup>

\*Translated from Portuguese

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<sup>24</sup> Greve, Joan E. "Study: 'Entitled' Men and Women Are More Sexist." Time. June 06, 2014. Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://time.com/2839352/study-entitled-men-and-women-are-more-sexist/>.