

**POLITICS**

**NEWS**

**A GAME OF THREE SIDES**

**GENDER**

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**KAREN ROSS**

**WILEY Blackwell**



**Gender, Politics, News**



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A Game of Three Sides

*Karen Ross*

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*To my mother, Fatima (Joan) Sharpe, who died while I was writing this book, aged 91 and three-quarters. She never really understood what I do as a job but she was always proud. I have inherited her love of words and chocolate but, happily, not her dislike of writing, thanks Mum.*





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## 1

## Introduction

*Since the beginning of time – well, since American women got the vote in 1920 – the slightest upward tick in the number of female lawmakers has inspired excited predictions that women politicians are on the verge of taking over. People always seem to think a small group of women is bigger and more influential than it is...*

(Mundy 2014: n.p.)

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which set out a moral and philosophical argument about why women and men should enjoy the same rights. That work was a brave and foundational text whose arguments have been taken up and considerably extended by generations of feminist theorists. In it, Wollstonecraft identified the numerous ways in which sex inequality was manifest in society, naming patriarchy and sex-based discrimination as primary culprits in a world dominated by men intent on retaining power and control. Although feminism has no single or agreed definition, it is broadly seen as an ideological and *political* standpoint which has the practical goal of ending discrimination against women and enabling them to take an equal place in society with men.

Much feminist/political/communication work considers politics and the media, both separately and entwined, as two of the primary terrains on which the campaign for sex-based equality has been and continues to be fought most actively. Feminist media theory uses a nuanced language and set of analytical terms to interrogate the media and their messages. Political communication is narrowly defined here to mean how politicians communicate with the public (via mediated channels of message delivery) and how politicians and the political process more generally are represented by the media. Framing analysis has been a particularly helpful tool in interrogating news discourse for its gender bias, identifying historical and geopolitical trends through a feminist framework which

seeks to understand why we get what we get. In general terms, the triple whammy of *trivialization*, *marginalization*, and *commodification* serves to produce political coverage which too frequently disavows the potency of women as credible political actors and undermines democracy by withholding information about them from the public during election campaigns. Of course, this is not always and everywhere the case and the last few years have seen increasing numbers of women achieve the top political job. However, many would argue this has been *in spite of* rather than *because of* mainstream news media, although the novelty argument suggests that women can sometimes attract more media playtime than men, though even here, more is not always desirable: all publicity is *not* always good.

Fear of women's rule is, arguably, a key factor in understanding men's dominance of the political stage and every time the proportion of women looks to rise even slightly – even though few Western legislatures (apart from Scandinavia) can boast more than 20 percent of women in their chambers – the knee-jerk response is vociferous complaints about a take-over by the monstrous regiment of women. When women unseat men as party leader, their acts are seen as treacherous rather than the cut and thrust of “normal” political maneuvering and attract widespread media attention. If a woman's act of usurping male authority not only wins her the party leadership but also the top job, or at least puts it within her grasp, the coup takes on a ground-breaking connotation, as happened with Helen Clark and Jenny Shipley (New Zealand), and more recently Julia Gillard (Australia). Such extraordinary events play out in the media as political melodrama, allowing metaphors of war to animate the performance of power and inveigling gender to act as proxy for emasculation, provoking male-wails of despair. In her analysis of TV news coverage of Helen Clark's coup, Trimble (2014) argues that she was persistently cast as a cold, heartless villain and her conspicuous and unashamed transgression of gender norms was evidence of the threat she posed to the dominant social and political order. This kind of (melo)dramatic scripting of stories involving women political leaders both highlights and reinforces normative assumptions about political power and leadership, both of which are coded as exclusively male.

In a modern democracy such as that fondly imagined to exist in the so-called civilized West in the twenty-first century, most journalists would suggest that they write and broadcast in the public interest, that they serve an important function in holding governments accountable and reporting on the actions of those whom we elect to serve in our name. But as news media move ever further and faster towards mere infotainment, so their ability or even interest in reporting politics in any meaningful way goes at equal velocity in the opposite direction.

The rhetoric of impartiality which the news media have always insisted lies at the heart of their practice has never been as pristine as journalists have claimed, but the relationship between journalists and politicians has become increasingly complex and intertwined. Obviously, for both sets of professional actors, there is a necessary interdependence, since journalists need something to write about and politicians need to get their messages across to the public. "Sources, particularly those in government, are the lifeblood of news" (Perloff 1998: 223). The media, and television in particular, ventilate the *realpolitik*, with presidents and prime ministers announcing important policy decisions not in the Senate or the Commons but in the TV studio, live to camera and directly to us in our homes or on our phones. Actually, in the mid-twenty-teens, many are now tweeting out first.

The perpetuation of a hegemonic worldview of male dominance is regularly witnessed in both fictional and factual programming strands, and the ways in which women (particularly, but also other disadvantaged groups) are represented in the media send important messages to the public about women's place, women's role, and women's lives. If it has become a commonplace to argue that news media regularly and routinely perform an affirmatory function in reinforcing dominant norms and values to the public, it still bears repeating. The sad frustration is that after more than 25 years of documenting the media's representation of women (see also Tuchman et al. 1978; Root 1986 for an even longer timeline), I see so little change. Importantly, part of the endurance of gender stereotypes in news discourse can be related directly to the culture of newsrooms themselves, microcosmic environments which constitute sites of considerable contestation about gender and power (Steiner 1998; Gallagher 2001; de Bruin and Ross 2004). While women *have* penetrated media organizations to a significant degree over the past two or three decades, they have rarely managed to secure the editorship of major dailies or become CEOs of major broadcast channels.

When asked, women politicians themselves are clear that a specifically gendered news discourse *does* exist when journalists report on the political activities of women (Ross 2002). Aspects of their corporeal presentation, their hairstyle, their clothes, and their domestic arrangements are routinely incorporated into what should be straightforward stories on policy but where subjects are routinely framed as women first, and then, maybe, as politicians. When 101 Labour women were elected to the British Parliament in 1997, the front page headlines figured them as "Blair's Babes." Although some of those women have argued in retrospect that doing the "Blair picture" was perhaps unwise, they were unprepared for the media response: their considerable victory was trivialized instantly, not just by that possessive apostrophe, but through their sexualized

figuring as “babes.” Women have been elected to the top political job as presidents and prime ministers, but still their abilities to lead a country are questioned, still the media ask, can she really do it? When Angela Merkel was seeking election as Germany’s Chancellor in 2005, the media’s response was depressingly sexist:

...another problem for the campaign, however, was Merkel herself. Despite the orange posters and the theme song *Angie* from the Rolling Stones, there was not much rock ‘n’ roll in the Merkel camp. Its flag-bearer was mocked as a frumpish former academic unable to connect with ordinary people...

(Campbell Templin 2005: n.p.)

Judith Butler (1990) has argued persuasively not simply that gender is a performance and that we are *all* performers, but that over time, normative renditions of femininity and masculinity become so routinized and accepted that they become social “fictions” (and I would add, social “facts”), which society then expects to see played out, stereotypes of what passes as appropriate behavior for women and men. For their part, the media perpetuate these gender stereotypes, deploying a set of regulatory controls which attempt to “fix” women in their proper place, including women politicians.

This book is primarily about power, patriarchy, and culture, about the immensely tricky relations which exist between politics, gender, and media, between women and men, between politicians and journalists. I discuss the many and various ways in which those relations are played out, in election contexts and in the everyday cut and thrust of political reportage, using a feminist media interpretive lens to reveal and interpret the frames that are routinely operationalized in news about women and politics and the politics of gendered news. We can make sense of much of the media’s vilification of Hillary Clinton by considering not only the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a very few players who are closely aligned to the conservative right, but also by recognizing that the same harassment and taunts of “noisy virago” were leveled against the Suffragettes more than 100 years ago (Rake 2006) in the pages of the establishment press. Some commentators suggest we are now living through an age of third-wave feminism (with some going as far as to say we are now enjoying a fourth or even fifth wave), which appears to appropriate the postmodern turn in promoting an “anything goes as long as we’re enjoying ourselves” ethos. However, I must say that, personally, I cannot accept the legitimacy of a position which calls itself “feminist” but which is so avowedly self-absorbed and politically bankrupt, so my own position and the lens through which I interrogate the substance of



gendered political communication is more in the tradition of second-wave feminism, which seeks equality through social transformation, simultaneously recognizing the significant battles won but also the goals yet to be achieved.

In the chapters that follow, I focus primarily on the ways in which political women (and men) are represented in and by news media. I argue that, notwithstanding the more general slide towards infotainment, easy-chew news, and the priapic imperative, politics is *still* regarded as jobs for the boys, literally, despite the success of women's global campaigns to become president or prime minister, so that women continue to be seen at best as a novelty, at worst as aberrations, in media discourse. In a number of elections where women were competing for the highest political office, their personal lives became the topic of intense scrutiny, every detail examined for signs of deviancy or scandal, especially if they were unmarried or childfree (McGregor 1996; Comrie 2006; van Zoonen 2006; Trimble and Treiberg 2010). As I write this, Hillary Clinton is busy winning Democrat nominations to be the US presidential candidate, but a regular feature of so many news reports is her campaign outfit, her hairstyle, and whether Bill is in tow. Whilst the media's tabloid turn means that *all* politicians are more vulnerable to the trivializing interests of journalists (see also Juntunen and Väliverronen 2010), women's more limited media coverage results in an over-determined focus on the personal over the political. Understanding quite why journalists seem so out of step with the views of the public whose voting behavior suggests a more sophisticated appreciation of women's political potential is not straightforward and a simple complaint of sexism is insufficient, although obviously contributory. What seems clear is that gender-differentiated coverage of politicians is a *global* phenomenon and a variety of factors are in play, including the circulation and routinization of gender-based stereotypes, the male-ordered nature of many newsroom environments, and the reliance on the "usual suspects" as sources and subjects for news discourse. While this is not everywhere the case and some women politicians *do* seem to receive gender-neutral and sometimes even *positive* coverage, this is not the general trend.

In Chapter 2, I consider feminist theories of both politics and political communication, arguing that not only is the personal also political, but that the political is always gendered. Out of second-wave feminism, political commentators such as Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (1996), Judith Squires (1999), and Valerie Bryson (2003) were all using a sharply feminist-critical lens to explore what it meant to talk about gendered politics, the implications of men's dominance in and of the political sphere, how (and if) women politicians can and do influence both policy and political processes, and how democracy can be transformed with the

greater involvement of women in both formal and informal politics. Drawing on feminist ideas, this more explicitly *political* body of work generated a set of theoretical concepts and definitions which reworked political theory with a gendered face, bringing a more thoughtful analysis to the very meaning of politics, democracy, and citizenship. Disentangling sex (biology) from gender (social construction) and differentiating among institutions (organizations which *make* decisions), processes (*how* decisions are made), and policies (*outcomes* of decision-making) enabled a clearer understanding of where women fit into the larger socio-political picture and, importantly, revealed the gaping hole that was (and is) the gender deficit. Identifying the *logic* of politics demonstrated how an absence at one end – lack of women at the institutional level (as elected representatives) – is very likely to have consequences at the other end, that the concerns of women citizens are less likely to be reflected in policy outcomes. However, contained within that appeal for more women to be elected as politicians are two competing and contradictory rationales. One is the “equity” argument which says that similar numbers of women and men should be elected representatives on the grounds of fairness and proportionality. The other is the “difference” argument which says that women should represent the interests of other women. The problem is that one does not imply and cannot include the other, so that when women do *not* promote or support women-friendly policies, they are criticized for their failure to be sisterly. But then if they *do*, they are criticized for not representing the entirety of their constituency, the women *and* the men: such criticisms and expectations are not leveled against men. These contradictory expectations have also been described as differences between women’s *descriptive* and *substantive* political representation as well as constituting what Carole Pateman (1989) has described as the “Mary Wollstonecraft dilemma,” which demands *both* a gender-neutral (universal) *and* a gender-differentiated citizen. These contradictory impulses and expectations are also present when considering the relationship of women to political communication and, in particular, the ways in which women politicians are represented in media discourse and the ways in which women media professionals are expected to act when occupying senior posts.

Chapter 3 looks at gendered journalism and, in particular, the ways in which women experience both horizontal and vertical segregation when they enter and then attempt to progress their media careers (see European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE] 2013; Ross 2015a). Women have a creditable history as pioneers within mainstream media organizations, especially in the United States, and as producers of women-focused material, working as journalists, editors, producers, broadcasters, and filmmakers (Collins 1980; Beasley and Gibbons 1993;

Steiner 1997; Halper 2001; Bye 2010). Over the past four decades, a number of studies have attempted to map women's employment within media organizations and the trends which have emerged suggest that across media industries, women enter the professional workforce in large numbers but fail to progress as quickly or as far as their male colleagues. While some do become notable political journalists, many more are sidelined into less prestigious beats and genres and I discuss some of the possible explanations for women's thwarted ambitions. These patterns of potential denied are taking place on a global scale, as much in the developed West as in the developing nations of the global South such as sub-Saharan Africa (Okunna 2005) and India (Joseph 2004). Longitudinal and comparative studies such as the Global Media Monitoring Project are immensely helpful in identifying global patterns in women's experiences which undermine suggestions that these sexist phenomena are context-specific and relevant to particular geopolitical environments: they are not, they are globally significant and globally endemic. Across the world, fewer than a quarter of political reporters are women (WACC 2015). When considering the roles and status that women *do* achieve, it is clear that their involvement in the decision-making tiers of media organizations has been and continues to be extremely modest, and even in online journalism contexts, women are still at a disadvantage compared with men (Thiel 2004). Despite poorer promotion prospects and a male-ordered culture which is often sexist and discriminatory (see North 2009), many women nonetheless choose to remain working as journalists, developing a variety of "coping" strategies including becoming "one of the boys," deciding consciously *not* to do that and trying to stretch the boundaries of what counts as "news," or else they leave mainstream media entirely and work for women's media such as magazines, go freelance, or set up their own media businesses.

The strand of research inquiry that has proved to be the most popular, at least in terms of published work, is that which considers the ways in which women (and men) as political candidates are framed in news discourse during elections. Other strands include the representation of women politicians more generally, often in comparison with their male counterparts and often using a matched case-study approach; and women competing for the most senior political jobs or in running-mate positions. I consider both these contexts in Chapters 4 and 5, looking at the representation of women and men politicians as both electoral candidates and incumbents in Chapter 4, and competing for the top job in Chapter 5. Most work on political journalism and representation describes at least two abiding tendencies: one is that women are represented differently (more negatively) to men, and the other is that women are mostly invisible in the news, including during elections. These two

chapters make similar arguments and also suggest that women's electoral success is compromised by a journalistic emphasis on personal and corporeal characteristics (trivialization) rather than a rendering of their policy positions. The broader problem of what Tuchman et al. (1978) and others have described as women's "symbolic annihilation" (marginalization) in their foundational work on women and news has a contemporary global relevance and resonance when considering political women's media fortunes. Even women who compete for and then win the top job of prime minister or president remain vulnerable to the media's personalizing proclivities, so that Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir's (Iceland) same-sex marriage, Angela Merkel's (Germany) dress sense, and Julia Gillard's (Australia) childfree status were all subjects of considerable media scrutiny, often more so than the attention paid to the way they govern/ed their respective countries or their position on global terrorism. The use of specifically gendered language to describe women politicians – for example, women are strident and hysterical while men are assertive and authoritative – also positions them as women first, their sex rather than their profession being their primary signifier (commodification). A popular explanation given for women's failure to hold onto political power is often their sex (weak), their stamina (poor), and their credibility with voters (diminished), personalized accusations which are rarely made about failing men, who are more usually criticized for policy failures.

Chapter 6 discusses a significantly under-researched aspect of gender and politics by exploring the role of the political spouse, mostly understood as the First Lady or her equivalent, but I also discuss a few examples of political husbands such as Bill Clinton and the late Denis Thatcher. The chapter considers the ways in which the media frame not only the political spouse but also the families of politicians and the ways in which politicians themselves appropriate and use family members as trophies of "normality." Here, I discuss the double standards in play when parenthood is annexed to the job of politician and where political mothers and fathers are framed entirely differently. While politician fathers can leverage considerable credibility with the public as virile protectors of the nation, political mothers are more usually condemned for being aberrant and abnormal in abandoning the nursery and their maternal duties in favor of the selfish pursuit of a fulfilling career. It is telling that a majority of the women who have achieved the top job have been childfree, although several, such as Julia Gillard and Helen Clark, felt compelled to marry their long-term partners as they developed their political careers, arguably in an attempt to appear as "ordinary" as possible, despite their problematic lack of accessory children to thrust under the media spotlight.

Chapter 7 considers the ways in which women and men politicians have fared when scandal has touched their lives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, male politicians are much more likely to be accused (and often also convicted) of criminal behavior than women, not least because there are so many more of them. What becomes clear in this chapter, however, is not only that women and men accused of the same kinds of misdemeanor are viewed and treated differently by both the media and the public, but that women and men are mostly involved in different kinds of scandalous events. Women are more likely to be involved in activities involving fraud and men are more likely to be involved in sex-based scandals: where women *are* involved in sex scandals, they receive far more opprobrium than men, whose actions more often provoke a sanguine shrug than the outraged accusations of deviant sexual behavior.

The final chapter brings the various strands of my overarching arguments together. One book obviously cannot do justice to all the nuances and inflections of gendered political communication, nor can it cover all geopolitical contexts, nor can it discuss all the contributing identity markers to sex such as race, ethnicity, age, ability, and sexuality, so I am sure I will not please everyone in my choice of foci. However, as gender inflects *everything* we experience as human subjects, whether we recognize it or not, and as the personal is *always* political, I hope that in general terms the book will contribute a few insights to the growing literature on gender, politics, and media and that readers will find something in these pages of use and interest.



## 2

## Women and Politics: Then and Now

*For those of us who have been working for the vote all our lives, it is an historic occasion ... but we must not imagine that our work is over. Our cause is a long way from full success.*

(Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 1928, quoted in Stephenson 1998: 141)

### Introduction

The history of institutional politics is the *herstory* of women's exclusion from formal participation in democracy, first by refusing women the vote, and then through the various strategies which made (and still make) women's selection for political candidacy and subsequent election unnecessarily difficult. Squires (1999) suggests that women's response to the political stranglehold of hegemonic masculinity has taken two main forms, one being the pursuit of women's enfranchisement, the other being the extension of what is considered to be political participation beyond the formal institutions of political power, symbolized by the slogan that the "personal is political," taken up as the battle-cry of second-wave feminism. The demand for greater rights for women, including political rights, has been an integral part of women's campaigning for more than 200 years, with courageous and pioneering women such as Abigail Adams in the United States and Mary Wollstonecraft in Britain finding different ways to pursue similar goals. For Adams, married to the second president of the United States, John Adams (1797–1801), her political actions mostly took the form of quiet influence on her husband in relation to promoting women's rights. Mary Wollstonecraft was more directly involved, writing revolutionary texts which promoted ideas of sexual equality and women's emancipation from the normative constriction of

idealized femininity. Wollstonecraft is regarded by many as being the original feminist and her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792 when she was 33 years old and five years before her premature death from childbirth complications, is regarded as the foundational feminist text. That work, and the ones that followed, clearly elucidated and challenged women's marginalization and became heroic and canonical feminist blueprints for a more equal society. However, most scholars suggest that, these early texts aside, a more concentrated effort to bring about women's suffrage began to take a more solid shape in the 1830s and 1840s, tied in to anti-slavery campaigns and the wider issue of human rights and equality (Finnegan 1999). Those campaigns articulated a moral imperative for societal and political reform which brought together women and men in collective action to strive for recognition of their status as equal to one another.

Arguably, it was the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 which saw what is now considered to be the first formal demand for women's enfranchisement, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues met to debate the status of American women. They laid out their demands for the achievement of democratic rights and the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which formalized women's political rights as voters and as candidates for political office (Walkosz and Kenski 1995). However, the stakes for achieving female emancipation were so high that some proponents slipped back into protecting elite white privilege by insisting that (white) women's rights were more important than those of black men and women. In Britain, a concerted campaign for women's suffrage came a little later with the establishment of the London Society for Women's Suffrage in 1867, followed by the launch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (the main Suffragist movement), under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. Six years later, the Women's Social and Political Union (the main Suffragette movement) was established under Emmeline Pankhurst's leadership, mostly in frustrated response to the lack of progress made by the largely peaceful Suffragist movement. The Suffragettes, on the other hand, were committed to obtaining women's enfranchisement by more or less any means necessary and their motto of "deeds not words" was regularly acted out, the "deeds" often involving criminal acts which led to women's incarceration. Women over the age of 30 years were eventually given the vote in 1918, and a year later Nancy Astor became the first woman MP to take her seat in Parliament. In the 26 years in which she worked as an MP, there were few other women who joined her, but at least she had a seat early on, unlike in Australia where the first women to be elected to Federal Parliament (Dorothy Tangney and Dame Enid Lyons) had to wait until 1943.