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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

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**The Tragic Legacy of the "Two Firsts":
Why Hillary Won't Talk About Gender the Way Barack Will Talk About Race
By Jewel Woods
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I had a colleague from overseas email me after Senator Obama's speech in Pennsylvania to say that children will be reading his speech for the next 150 years. I happen to agree with his assertion, yet it is surprising that many pundits in the mainstream media, like David Gergen, continue to insist that attention to issues of race and gender are dominating conversation within the democratic primaries and distracting from the "real" issues, when in reality, we have learned far more about race during this primary season than we have learned about gender.

In the wake of the debacle over Dr. Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and the now historic speech by Senator Obama on race in America, there was an interesting suggestion that Senator Clinton might give a speech on gender in the aftermath of the telling - yet seemingly forgotten - comments of Geraldine Ferarro that Senator Obama's success was due to him being either black or a man or both!?

The suggestion was that Senator Clinton would come out and offer a landmark speech on gender the way Senator Obama did on race, and the way Governor Romney attempted to do on religion. It was the assertion that somehow Senator Clinton would demonstrate to the American people the persistent problems women face in American society, and put into context the explosive comments made by some of her more strident supporters like Gloria Steinem, who penned an OP Ed piece in the New York Times that said, "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House."

If what Gloria Steinem has suggested is true (and I happen to believe she is correct), why have we not heard such a speech by Senator Clinton? Why have we not heard any of the surrogates of Hillary Clinton offer a compelling treatise on the status of women in society?

Many commentators within the black community argued that it was "inevitable" that Senator Obama would have to give a speech on "race". Not only in light of the comments by Rev. Wright, but also because of pressure within the black community by opinion-framers like Tavis Smiley to have him address issues like Katrina, unemployment, education, incarceration, and other issues that have disproportionately impacted Black America in the past, and continue to impact Black America in the present.

However, was it ever "inevitable" that Senator Clinton would have to give a speech on gender? And is it inevitable now that Senator Clinton will respond to the comments of her surrogates or the demands within the women's/feminist movement that insist she talk about issues of gender the way that constituents within the black community have consistently called for Senator Obama to address issues of race?

To date, we have not heard such a speech by Senator Clinton, and it is likely that we will not hear such a speech from Senator Clinton in the near future. The likely reason is not, as some may suggest, that a return to such "identity politics" on her part would signal a failed policy among the Democrats as they focus on the general elections. Nor that attempting to talk about gender would somehow stigmatize her as playing the "victim" or as trying to "work the refs" as some have argued.

The likely reason why we will not hear Senator Clinton offer a landmark speech on gender and women is that the issue of sex- and gender-based discrimination in American society is far more complex and contradictory than what many of her supporters and surrogates have suggested.

One of the ironies of the Op Ed piece by Gloria Steinem, for example, is that it seems to have escaped Steinem that a year prior to her even entering the race, Senator Clinton had been touted as the "presumptive" nominee of the Democratic Party. Combine this with the fact that Senator Clinton is a millionaire, highly educated, and a part of a growing class of women leaders in government, business, the social services, and education, and it would suggest that gender is not the intractable barrier that Steinem was arguing it to be.

So is this a simple case of "I think the ladies doth protest too much"? Absolutely not! Rather it is the suggestion that the existence of sexism and gender-based hierarchies has to be demonstrated and not just stated. More importantly, it is an observation that the realities of women in the US, especially the realities of white women in the US, have changed in the last two decades. The drastic advantages and privileges of white women over people of color of any gender! - has been contended for a long time by feminists of color. This is one of the reasons why black women appear not to have been too quick to jump on the claims that male sexism explains the success of Senator Barack Obama.

The real tragedy of this election among the "Two Firsts"- one black male and one

white female- is that if Senator Clinton eventually becomes the Democratic nominee, it will have occurred with virtually no national conversation about the complex issues of sex and gender.

There would have been no attempts to talk about and explain the persistent gender gaps in pay, the continue trauma of domestic violence and sexual assault in the lives of women, the very limited way(s) that boys and girls are raised to be men and women, and many other dynamic issues of sex and gender that impinge on the lives of women and men.

Just as Democrats are forced to ponder why working class whites continue to vote against their interests, reminiscent of *What's The Matter With Kansas*, we are left to wonder why women do not have the same class cohesion as other groups. In the case of the white working class, we know that their voting against their own interest has a lot to do with the history of race in this country. We know that the white working class has quite often been shaped by its own racism, and that it has fought against alliances with blacks and other people of color that would have advanced a progressive agenda to the benefit of all.

What we do not fully understand is why women vote against their perceived interest. According to CNN exit polls, in 2004, White women voted 44% for Democrats while 55% of white women voted Republicans. In contrast, 75% of non-white women voted Democrat, whereas only 24% non-white women voted Republican. A similar pattern was evident in 2006 & 2000. Presumably, Senator Clinton is in a unique position to shed light on these complex dynamics.

If Senator Clinton were to give such an "historic" speech on gender, she might gain more admiration among American voters, just as polls indicate this occurring for Senator Obama, following his speech on race. People rallied to his call for change even more, and saw him as the agent of that change.

To repeat, this does not mean that sexism does not exist. Not at all. What it suggests is that if Senator Clinton becomes the Democratic nominee, we may not be better off as a nation if we do not have a national conversation about sexism and gender - issues that both her supporters and our organization, The Renaissance Male Project Inc., believe in so strongly. The result is likely that neither men nor women will really believe sex and gender are still dominant issues in American life. More importantly, men of all races will not have been invited to examine the way that masculinity, morality, and male privilege influence their lives.


If there were to be one benefit from having these "Two Firsts", it would be that both candidates elevated the conversation around issues that make them unique. Thus far, only one candidate can claim victory in that area.


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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)
Click Here

[Home](#)

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