

Women in Media

While forms of media have changed and adapted to the evolving digital era over the years their treatment of women has remained relatively the same. Women in media not only endure sexist treatment by various avenues of media, but also face lack of representation in media due to their gender. This has been a point of interest for me throughout my academic career and has increased significantly as I have immersed my studies in the field of journalism. In my journalism as well as WGST studies I began to notice instances where women were treated and represented poorly in the field of media (whether that was social platforms, news articles, radio, television, etc.). The first instance of this was Dr. Krystyn Moon's class regarding American Sexualities (AMST 303) in the fall of 2016. During this course the presidential election was raging on, and Dr. Moon made sure to have a conversation every session regarding the latest sexism that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was facing in the media. One example which startled me (and my classmates) was how supporters of Clinton were participating in sexist rhetoric by referring to Clinton by her first name, Hillary. And yet, all the male candidates were referred to by their last names. Consistently, Clinton was the lone exception among her male opponents. Granted, Clinton herself used her first name during her campaign and various people wanted to distinguish between her and her husband, Bill. However, even with these two factors Clinton was still being treated differently in the media, even it was as insignificant as her name.

These conversations were formative for me as a young WGST scholar and influenced my research in my religious studies course, which focused on representations of female martyrs in early Christianity. In early Christianity, martyrologies served as a form a media for populations. They were sources of information of new or recent events—the martyrdom of Christians—and thus are

considered a source of media by scholars. In the fall of 2017 I had the opportunity to present this research at the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) conference in Mansfield, Pennsylvania. This was the first time I decided to include a journalism angle to my research of female martyrs. For the talk, I focused my attention on how women are portrayed in contemporary media shares many similarities to how women were portrayed in ancient forms of media. My objective for my presentation of this new branch of research was to demonstrate to other scholars how female martyrs were only recognized in history because they possessed masculine traits and rebuked signs of femininity. I argued that it was only because they share characteristic traits with the male sex that their stories were told. Likewise, I focused my attention on how women in contemporary media face the same issue. When women in the media are not “emotional” or “nasty” they are covered in a kinder light in the media. However, if women portray traits that are typically associated with femininity, they are treated harshly by the media. One example of this lies in the way Clinton was treated during, and after, her presidential campaign.

Because of my early conversations of how Clinton was treated in the media, in 2017 I extended my research of how female martyrs were represented in ancient forms of media by comparing those representations to how present-day women are represented in the media. Researching this topic prompted me to take a closer look at what was being written and said about women as they interacted with the media. For example, in 2017 Clinton released her book about the 2016 election titled, *What Happened*. After its release, Clinton received negative feedback and was hurled gendered insults such as “whiny” and “hormonal.” In fact, these adjectives were sometimes even uttered by liberals, who are typically opponents of sexism in the media. When I presented my research in 2017 at the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC)

conference, I witnessed the same casual sexism that Clinton has experienced during her career. However, what concerned me was the source of this sexist rhetoric which came from a student my age who was a Bernie Sanders supporter. This supporter referred to Clinton as “vindictive” and “shrill” because of certain parts of her book where she aired her grievances with Sanders. When I questioned the audience member as to why he used those adjectives to describe her he was only able to answer with “because she is.” These insults directed at Clinton had no concrete evidence to support them and the only justification he presented to me was a facile comment about who she was at the core of her being. Clinton’s gender cannot be ignored in this instance, because the insults used contained gendered language to discredit her recent publication and her campaign. Witnessing this subservice sexism in my peers as well as political allies was a pivotal moment for my research because it exemplified just how deeply rooted and prominent sexist treatment of women in media is.

In the past, my research mostly focused on a broad question of how women were treated in the media, but after recent conversations with female scholars and journalists I have noticed that the mistreatment and representation of women in media should not be limited to just the *coverage* of them, but must also focus on their *interactions* with the media. A short phone interview with Kelly J. Baker reinforced this branch of research. In our conversation we discussed her frequent experiences as a female religious scholar and her interactions with the media. In Baker’s time as a scholar and journalist, followers of her media accounts question her authority of her topic of expertise and frequent harassment and threats. she has experienced followers of her media accounts questioning her authority of her topic of expertise and frequent harassment and threats. As Baker noted, these occurrences are something that her female colleagues experience more than

her male colleagues and is a direct tie to her gender as she navigates through media interactions. Baker's experience has prompted her to conclude this is a gender issue, and is one that has prompted her to become more hardened in her interactions on her social platforms.

In addition to experiencing gendered situations with the media, Baker and I discussed gendered situations *as* the media. As it turns out, I am not alone experiencing that a majority of my interviews with men are harder to control and less productive. In both our experiences with interviewing men, we have utilized tactics to be taken seriously such as dressing certain ways so we don't come off too young or unprofessional. And still, our questions are dismissed or completely ignored during an interview. This revelation was one I hadn't considered before in both my research and experience. Therefore, I have moved from simply a focus on how the media treats women, to how women are treated as members of the media. As a young woman going into the journalism field, I am a little nervous about what I am walking into.

With this old and new knowledge in mind, it is important for me to begin thinking of what is next for me as I leave academia and enter the workforce. I believe how women are treated and represented in media severely affects how they are treated in everyday life, which is what inspired me to design my second senior capstone. My WGST 485 course titled, "Sexual Violence and Women's Health in Fredericksburg, VA" is a journalistic analysis of intersections of oppression that women in the city of Fredericksburg face. This project works to heighten awareness of issues women face that are intimately connected to their gender and raise awareness of resources women have in the area that they can take advantage of.

While attending UMW's Classics, Philosophy and Religion department's *Religious Freedom in a Fractured America*, I had the opportunity to listen to several female public scholars discuss their

experience with harassment regarding their presence in the media. Dr. Dorothy Kim and Dr. Kelly J. Baker discussed how online harassment has provided many people, especially members of the Alt-Right, a platform to attack public scholars in an protected way. Behind the screens of their laptops of the protection of certain Alt-Right organizations, users were able to use social media platforms to target and harass the scholars about their opinions in their areas of expertise. This ultimately led to many uncomfortable situations for the scholars, specifically Dr. Kim. She has dwelt with a certain aggressive harasser online, and that treatment was specifically directed at her because of her race and gender. While both scholars have faced harassment online, they are not the sole recipients of this behavior. Many women in media—whether they be politicians, journalists, scholars, or celebrities—face incredible harassment that is clearly instigated because of their gender. If the media focused on representing women accurately and treating them fairly, the everyday lives of women, outside the media, would improve. The discrimination against women in everyday life is a direct effect of how the media covers them and interacts with them.

This is ultimately what I want to do with my journalism and women's studies experience. I want to portray women and the issues they face as they should be: fairly and accurately. I believe that with realistic portrayals of women in the media I can help combat the stigmas and modes of oppression linked to their gender and raise awareness of the resources they have (such wonderful non-profits which work around the clock to provide support). This is what is next for me as a journalist and a women's advocate. I have been applying to non-profits and newsrooms in the hope of working in public relations or reporting, but my articles focusing on women will hopefully not stop upon graduation. Regardless of the internship or job I will (hopefully) obtain in the upcoming months, I still plan to free-lance in order to keep my gender focus articles circulating.

