

Hillary Rodham Clinton – as the First Lady Addressing Domestic and Global Women’s Issues

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Abstract

Hillary Rodham Clinton as the First Lady was the most empowered presidential wife in the American history addressing women’s issues nationally and internationally. Besides engaging in American women’s and children’s inequality issues, Hillary Clinton got involved in addressing women’s problems in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as she believed women and girls are often community’s greatest untapped resource, which makes investing in them a powerful and effective way to promote international development.

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Introduction

Throughout the history of the U.S. countless numbers of women have worked on many fronts to improve women’s lives. Some provide direct services, such as counseling, support groups, shelters, training schemes, etc. Others became advocates to reform the existing social, political and economic institutions to provide increased opportunities for more women. One of these advocates became Hillary Rodham Clinton, after entering the White House in 1993 as the First Lady. The role of feminine sex in the course of American politics is undeniable. Presidential couple, and its public or private life has always been and be the subject of nation’s interest, scrutiny, admiration, or criticism.

Presidency comes with utmost responsibilities in front of the country and these duties spread to their spouses as well, who make significant contributions to the U.S. history. In this paper I’ll dwell on Hillary’s contribution to promotion women’s social sustainability in the U.S. and abroad.

The Clinton White House has been different from any previous or following White House. Bill Clinton mentioned: “I have been graced beyond measure by my family life with Hillary” (Clinton, 2004). The years of Bill Clinton’s presidency can be considered as co-presidency, because of the influence and power Hillary owned with her husband.

Hillary is regarded as the most empowered presidential wife in American history, who could worry about White house dinners and a national health-care plan at the same time, and she contributed a lot towards blurring the line between ‘woman’s business’ and ‘man’s business’ and changing gender roles.

Critics claimed it was inappropriate for the first lady to play a crucial role in political affairs, but Bill Clinton was not against her involvement, on the contrary, he appreciated her worthiness and his presidential campaign slogan “two for the price of one” (Cornwell, 1994). Some critics called it inappropriate for the First Lady to play a central role in matters of public policy. Supporters pointed out that Hillary Clinton’s role in policy was no different from that of other White House advisors and that voters were well aware that she would play an active role in her husband’s presidency.

Bill Clinton’s campaign promise of “two for the price of one” led opponents to refer to the Clintons as “co-presidents”, or the Arkansas label “Billary”.

During her years as First Lady, Hillary became as insider to learn more precisely how government can serve people, how Congress really works, how people perceive politics and policy through the prism of the media and how American values can be reflected into economic and social progress. She evaluated the importance of America’s engagement with the rest of the world, she established and developed relationships with foreign leaders and understanding of foreign cultures, visiting seventy-eight nations.

At the same time visiting every state, gave her insight of women’s social problems, she became a magnet for feelings, good and bad, about women’s choices and roles (Clinton, 2003). Hillary’s tenure to promote women’s issues in the U.S. was complicated by her addressing global women’s issues. She had been working on women’s and children’s issues in the United States for twenty-five years and

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realized that although women in the U.S. had made gains economically and politically, the same could not be said for the vast majority of women in the world.

Women's Rights Are Human Rights

In September 1995, at one of the largest international conferences ever held, women from around the world, representing both governments and the private sector, gathered in Beijing to set forth a platform for the political, economic, and social empowerment of women. Hillary Rodham Clinton joined representatives from 189 countries for the United Nation's Fourth World Conference that stands out as one of the honors and highlights of her life. While participating Hillary hoped her presence would signal the U.S. commitment to the needs and rights of women in international policy. The conference adopted the Platform for Action that concentrated on a number of critical areas, including women's access to education, health care, economic and political participation; women's ability to be free from violence; to have legal rights for the girl, child; the role of women in conflict societies, and the role of women in peace and security. As a matter of fact, in her memoir, Hillary mentions, when in 1969 she entered Yale Law School, she was one of twenty-seven women out of 235 students to matriculate. This seemed a paltry number then, but it was a breakthrough at the time and meant that women would no longer be token students at Yale (ibid, 2003).

Hillary wanted her speech at conference to be simple, accessible and clear in its message that women's rights are not separate from human rights and to reveal how important it is for women to make choices for themselves in their lives. She brought her own experiences and described women and girls she had met all over the world who were working to promote education, health care, economic independence, legal rights and political participation, and to end injustices and inequalities that challenge women in most countries. Hillary's speech was straight-forward and critical, she didn't mention China or any other country by name, but there was little doubt about the conspicuous human rights violators to whom she was referring. She mentioned, that on the eve of a new millennium it was time to break silence. It was time to say in Beijing, and the world to hear, that it wasn't acceptable to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights... it was violation of human rights when babies were denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they were born girls; it was violation of human rights when women and girls were sold into the slavery of prostitution; it was a violation of human rights when women were raped in their own communities; it was violation of human rights when the main cause of death worldwide among women ages fourteen to forty-four was violence they were subjected to in their own homes by their own relatives. It was a violation of human rights when young girls were brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation; it was a violation of human rights when women were denied the rights to plan their own families, and that included being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will. And her final message was: "Human rights are women's rights... and women's rights are human rights,

once and for all" (Clinton, 2003, p. 305). Impressive was the ending of a speech with a call to action to return to their countries and renew efforts to improve educational, health, legal and political opportunities for women.

The last words made the serious and strong-faced delegates suddenly leap from their seats to give her a standing ovation. Delegates rushed to touch her and shout words of appreciation. However, the reaction of government was not so positive. The government had blocked out her speech from closed-circuit TV in the conference hall, which had been broadcasting highlights of the conference.

Nature of Work and Women

Work, once you get to thinking about it, is contradictory. It can be the thing that defines you, or what confines you. It can be an act of defiance, or submission. It is the way that people judge you, on initial acquaintance. For women especially, the world of work is accompanied with complication and unexpected tiger taps. Even in the liberated shining First World, there is a hidden lode of antiquated through that it is quite seemingly for the ladies to put on spike heels and invade the boardroom. It's not only the obvious things: the glass ceiling, the lack of females at the top of every single visible profession, the mad hours that moderate family life. It's not just the pay gap, which the tycoon insists is invented by company heads. It's the hum of the culture, an indecipherable static which gives the clue through articles in media and assumptions that somehow you have to justify yourself. On the other side, in the progressed environment, women are allowed to go to work, and walk in the street unchaperoned, and have their own money which is not the case for all the women of the world. Although if women will insist on going out and pursuing a high-powered career, they have to prove that they can still juggle all their female faculties: they must also perfect their cooking skills, be ideal mothers and loving wives, and, look pretty. There is no such imperative for man. Once a man is good at his job, that's it. He does not also have to be marvelous at gardening or interpreting famous works; For a working man to be judged a good father, he just has to show up.

Juggling Home and Work

Dictating to people how they should live and work can seem patronizing. It goes back to the perennial habit of putting people into nice comfortable little niches, complete with clearly written labels: observe here the suited career woman, while in the other corner is the domestic goddess, moving about in her velvet skirt and apron. The balance is hard to find, and only you know how to do it. Do not let the culture make you feel guilty because you are not following the prescribed rules or conforming to the sketched stereotypes (Kindersley & Vine, 2010, p. 69).

Hillary Clinton was well aware of the fact that U.S. women, especially mothers, are currently in the paid workforce than ever before. Many women work part-time jobs with low pay and no benefits. This is particularly stressful for single parents, most of whom are women. Even with two adults

working, many families find it hard to make ends meet. Although middle and upper-class families have the money to hire help in the home—nannies, maids, or carers for the elderly—and may send their children to boarding schools and summer camps, most families, whether there are to wage earners, or one continually juggle the demands of their jobs with running a home and family responsibilities.

This is one of the greatest strains on contemporary family life and many of working women, do a second shift—coming home to household chores after working outside the home. According to a New York Times and CBS News survey of teenagers conducted in 1994, most girls expected to marry, work outside the home, and share household responsibilities equally with their partners. Only 58 percent of the boys interviewed expected that their wives would work outside the home, compared with 86 percent of the girls. The boys did not see themselves doing what they considered “women’s work”, particularly cooking, cleaning and child care. Some of the girls interviewed saw this difference in terms of boys wanting to be “manly” and powerful at home and anticipated “a lot of fights” negotiating the relationship they want. One effect of the gendered division of labor in the home has been and similar distinction between women’s work and men’s work in the workforce.

Although in recent years some women have broken into professions and jobs that were once the domain of men, much work in the United States is still divided according gender lines, and women are greatly overrepresented in low-paying jobs. In a survey of top corporations, women accounted for 37.2 percent of employees, 16.9 percent of managers, and 6.6 percent of executive management (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). A Tucker remarked, “you do not have to look to Venus or Mars to find the difference in men and women. Just look at their paychecks” (Tucker, 1996, p. 3).

Most women in the workforce do “women’s work” in service and administrative support jobs, as secretaries, waitresses, and health aids. They work in day-care centers, elder-care facilities, garment factories, food processing retail stores, restaurants, laundries, and other women’s homes. Women in professional jobs tend to be elementary schools teachers, social workers, nurses and health care workers.

However, paradoxical it may sound in February 1993 just right after entering the White House, while hosting the first White House dinner party, Clinton encountered a lot of scrutiny from media and critics in terms of gender division activities. The mostly American-grown feast—turned out to be a grand success and Hillary gave interview to the New York Times, where she announced that they were banning smoking in the Executive Mansion, East and West Wings, that broccoli would return to the White House kitchen (having been exiled by the Bushes) and that they hoped to make the White House more accessible to the public. The White House press was not happy. In their view Hillary’s choice signaled her determination to avoid challenging questions about her role in the policy arena. Some critics suggested that the story was designed to “soften” Hillary’s image and portray her as a traditional woman in a traditional role. Some of the Clinton’s ardent defenders also took exception to the

interview and Hillary’s photo wearing a bare-shoulder, black Donna Karan evening dress, as not reflecting their conception of her Lady. If Hillary was serious about substantive policy issues, they thought, why was she talking to a reporter about food and entertainment? If she was really worrying about floral centerpieces and the color of table lines, how could Hillary be substantive enough to head a major policy effort? What kind of message was she sending?

It was obvious that people could perceive Hillary only as one thing or the other—either a hardworking professional woman or a conscientious and caring hostess. On this occasion Hillary brings the term “the double blind”, used by the distinguished professors of communications at the University of Pennsylvania Kathleen Jamieson, who says: gender stereotypes trap women by categorizing them in ways that don’t reflect the true complexities of their lives. It was becoming clear to Hillary that people who wanted her to fit into a certain box, traditionalist or feminist, would never be entirely satisfied with her—which is to say, with her many different, and sometimes paradoxical roles. Hillary’s friends lived the same way: teaching a political science class before preparing dinner for a huge family; running a White House meeting one minute and talking on the phone with granddaughters the next; giving birth to three children while working for Hillary at the White House, revising speeches or changing diapers at home. So who was the “real” woman? In fact most of women took all those roles more and every day of their lives Hillary expresses her understanding how hard it is to integrate the many disparate demands, choices and activities women pursue and face every day; most women live with nagging voices questioning the choices they make and with loads of guilt, whatever their choice. “In my own life I have been a wife, mother, daughter, sister-in-law, student, lawyer, children’s rights activist, law professor, Methodist, political advisor, citizen and so much else... Now I was a symbol—and that was a new experience” (Clinton, 2003, p. 140).

Bill and Hillary worried about the problems they would face when moving into the White House, but Hillary never expected that the way she defended her role as First Lady would generate so much controversy and confusion. In her own mind, she was traditional in some ways and not in others. She cared about the food she served guests, and she also wanted to improve the diversity of health care for all Americans. According Hillary, there was nothing inconsonant about her interests and activities.

“I was navigating uncharted terrain—and through my own experience, I contributed to some of the conflicting perceptions about me. It took me awhile to figure out that what might not be important to me might seem very important to many men and women across America. We were living in an era in which some people still felt deep ambivalence about women in positions of public leadership and power. In this era of changing gender roles, I was American’s Exhibit A” (Clinton, 2003, p. 141).

Contribution to Women's Social Change since 1998

Hillary Clinton pursued her main agenda to meet women of all U.S. States with great regularity and effort. Women's ardent speeches in all the U.S. States about their inequalities, abuse child care, children's number of problems inspired and empowered her to force passage of the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997, a federal effort that provided state support for children whose parents could not provide them with health coverage. She provided nationwide immunization against childhood illnesses and encouraged older women to seek a mammogram to detect breast cancer, with coverage provided by Medicare. She successfully sought to increase research funding for childhood asthma at the National Institute of Health. Together with Attorney General Janet Reno, Clinton helped create the Office on Violence against Women at the Department of Justice. In 1997, she initiated and shepherded the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which she regarded as her greatest accomplishment as First Lady. In 1999 she was instrumental in the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act, which doubled federal money for teenagers aging out of foster care.

Besides sharing American women's problems, Clinton addressed women while traveling to 79 countries. After China she visited Latin America to visit U.S. development programs that were assisting women and children, whose status, according to Clinton, directly reflects nation's economic and political progress. She was eager to work with counterparts to develop and implement a common agenda to eradicate measles and reduce maternal mortality rates, expand opportunities for girls to attend school throughout the Hemisphere.

In the same year Clinton in Belfast, Ireland met with women leaders of the peace movement, who were willing to work with Irish women across the religious divide resisting violence, which was stimulating high unemployment rate among women. Despite the Irish women of the north and south reaching legalization of divorce through referendum, and their economic, political and social progress, many obstacles remained.

Visiting African women in Senegal, Cape Town, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Hillary got dispirited at the deterioration of services, facilities, women's abuse, overwhelming poverty, crime and disease. But every time she traveled, she met extraordinary women, who were driving change in their communities. Hillary's goal became working even harder to address issues that impede women's progress and put critical tools into women's hands.

Conclusion

Hillary Clinton's - the First Lady's - heritage is beneficial not only for the American women, but for women all around the universe. Hillary addressed the issues that impede women's progress and putting critical tools into women's hands. She envisioned a future where women's rights are unquestion-

ably, unshakably and permanently recognized as full and equal human rights. She delivered a message: women are as powerful as men, they can achieve as much as men can, they can be mothers and leaders at the same time, they can serve the country as men do.

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