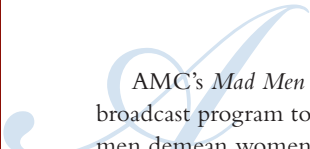


**Media Bias Against Women**  
***Stuck in a Bygone Era***

By Hope Viner Samborn



AMC's *Mad Men* isn't the only broadcast program today in which men demean women on the air or in the media. Consider a WRKO-AM Boston radio program in which producer Bill Cooksey stated the following about a Republican candidate for state treasurer, "I think she's hot. She's tiny. She's short. She's got a banging little body on her. Facial-wise, I give her about a seven. Body-wise, I give her an eight-and-a-half. Tight little butt. I endorse Karyn Polito." His cohost, Tom Finneran, former speaker of the Massachusetts state house, chimed in by repeating "tight little butt."

Despite calls for an apology from Polito's political opponent, WRKO-AM management refused.

### Stereotypes Persist

Although images of powerful women lawyers, doctors, candidates for public office, and presidents of companies appear in all types of media, the number of these portraits is still relatively small. Most often, media outlets color images of powerful women with the same stereotypes and double standards that have haunted women in the public arena for decades. Media personalities focus on women's gender, appearance, outfits, hairstyles, sexuality, and whether or not they are mothers.

"Things haven't changed in 102 years," says Professor Carolyn Kitch of Temple University in Philadelphia. "Certain images have a cultural resonance, and we see them over and over."

Women need not be running for office to be subjected to these stereotypes. During U.S. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan's confirmation hearings, some critics focused on her status as a single, older career woman.

"If women are competent, single, and 50, we have no use for them," says Linda Lowen, a media observer and journalist with about.com. The media speculated that Kagan was a lesbian "because they can't understand that a woman could say that a career could hold a top priority," Lowen adds.

Another Supreme Court justice,

Sonia Sotomayor, found herself subjected to media gender bias when conservative radio host G. Gordon Liddy said about her, "Let's hope that the key conferences aren't when [Sotomayor]'s menstruating or something, or just before she's going to menstruate. That would really be bad. Lord knows what we would get then."

Some media observers say it is a fear of powerful women that is the driving force behind these images. According to Lowen, this fear leads to "slut shaming"—a media method of calling a woman's sexuality into question and using innuendo to color a view of a woman's sexual morals. As women become more powerful and achieve more in the workplace, they expect to have greater gender equity. But instead, "there appears to be a subconscious backlash against it by the media, and slut shaming is one of those things," she says.

One recent example of this tactic occurred when the website Gawker.com displayed photographs of Krystal Ball, a 2010 Democratic candidate for Virginia's 1st District congressional seat. The pictures, taken during her college years at a party, show a dildo strapped on her ex-husband's face and Ball in racy situations.

Ball, a certified public accountant and business owner, blogged about the photos on the Huffington Post. "The tactic of making female politicians into whores is nothing new," she wrote in October 2010. "It's part of this whole idea that female sexuality and serious work are incompatible. I had to come out publicly and raise my voice on this issue, even though I risked becoming some joke candidate named Krystal Ball," she continued. "I also risked drawing more attention to the photos, which I still find tremendously embarrassing."

Lowen says Ball received terrific national coverage. "She got a positive response from anyone who interviewed her. It was a very important shift in this election cycle. "We have always felt that women were endangering themselves if they pointed out

the bias," Lowen adds. "The opposite is true if she steps up and takes an active role calling it out."

Men, however, are treated differently. When nude *Cosmopolitan* magazine photos—published in 1982 during his law school days—surfaced of Massachusetts State Senator Scott Brown prior to his election to the U.S. Senate, the media was almost mute, Lowen says. "A woman with a political career would have been slammed in a way that he wasn't," she notes. "Men are not called sluts."

### Fear of Powerful Women

Even when women such as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi achieve high positions, "they are both portrayed as powerful—almost shrews—who can be manipulative to get their way," says Lisa M. Parcell, assistant professor at the Elliott School of Communication of Wichita State University in Kansas. "The media and society like to see strong women such as Rosie the Riveter, but not powerful women like Eleanor Roosevelt, who had power over her husband."

Parcell adds that "men are supposed to be strong *and* powerful, and we are comfortable with that. Having strong women is okay, but powerful women still make us uncomfortable."

Some of the stereotypic treatment is subtle. *Forbes* presented the "World's 100 Most Powerful Women" list, which considers a woman's "buzz factor." The buzz factor is "a bizarre way of looking at a woman's power," Lowen says. "It is convenient shorthand for how the media ranks them—who is talking about them and who they are seen with." In this way, First Lady Michelle Obama ranked first and Clinton barely outranked singer/performance artist Lady Gaga.

In contrast, another *Forbes* list that looks at the "World's Most Powerful People" is composed almost entirely of men and does not consider any "buzz factor." This buzz factor perpetuates the view that women are

“arm candy rather than powerful people,” Lowen observes.

Women candidates often are treated as if they are fighting animals. In Florida, a local race depicted two women candidates in a “cat fight,” says Bernell E. Tripp, associate professor at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications in Gainesville. “We still have a tendency to attach stereotypes to women. Society has something to do with it.”

A September 2010 *Newsweek* cover story called “The Bear Truth: Will the ‘Mama Grizzlies’ Really Protect America’s Kids?” featured pictures of women candidates portrayed as grizzly bears—with the tag line “mama grizzlies,” a term Sarah Palin has used to refer to herself and women candidates she endorsed in the 2010 midterm elections.

“These women were depicted throughout that article as bears,” Kitch says. This is a traditional trend story that says “powerful women” are a “surprising new trend,” she adds. “Women’s success in anything—in politics, in sports, and in business—has been discussed as a surprising ‘new’ trend since the 1960s.”

Another recurring trend story examines moms who leave work to care for children. Kitch says that Google and Fox News have reported in recent months that “young women are now choosing to stay home with their kids. It is a story that comes up repeatedly as if it was new.” She adds that this kind of feature first appeared in *Parenting* magazine in the 1920s. “It tells me that women’s parity in the workplace has not changed,” she says. “That is kind of mind blowing because most moms work. Most don’t have a choice.”

### **Women News Source Shortage**

Many experts say one reason for this type of portrayal of women is that men are the media power brokers. Men hold 97 percent of the clout positions in mainstream media, according to the New York-based Women’s Media Center (WMC),

www.womensmediacenter.com. And this situation does not appear to be changing quickly. “Between 1990 and 2005 only 20 percent of new media jobs were held by women,” the center reports. Yet 65 percent of all mass communication students are women, the WMC states.

Leading media outlets often overlook the achievements of women even when they win Nobel prizes.

Sunday morning political talk shows such as NBC’s *Meet the Press*, ABC’s *This Week*, and CBS’s *Face the Nation* rarely feature women commentators. Only one in four guests is a woman, according to statistics provided by the WMC. “We are invited to the table, but not the best table,” Lowen says.

And fewer women are quoted as news sources when compared with men, especially for serious issues such as terrorism, observes Tamara K. Baldwin, chair and professor of the Department of Mass Media at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau.

The WMC tried to address the shortage of women news sources by creating SheSource.org, an online site that provides female experts for journalists to interview.

Although the evening news appears to be a bright spot with two women—CBS’s Katie Couric and ABC’s Diane Sawyer—sitting in the anchor chairs, experts say it is misleading. “It is ironic that women have reached a position of

importance in the television news industry at a time when the ratings of the evening news are going down and viewership is going down,” says Maurine H. Beasley, professor emerita of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland in College Park.

“Now that [television news] is falling on hard times, it is okay to let women in,” Lowen observes. “It’s not a moneymaking venture for the networks. It is a dinosaur.”

### **Downplaying Women’s Achievements**

In April 2010, the space shuttle *Discovery* set a record for the most women in space, but little was written about this or other strides made by women in science and technology, experts say. “The media just didn’t feel that it was important. Science, technology, engineering, and math are not sexy,” she says, observing that leading media outlets often overlook the achievements of women even when they win Nobel prizes. “We have to commodify women, and ranking them in terms of intelligence is not in the media’s interest,” Lowen adds.

In sports, women receive limited media coverage, especially on the professional level. However, Kitch says female Olympians are being covered, a change in the past 25 years.

“News media images of women in sports are a good example of how positive portrayals of female athletes—or the fact that they get any coverage—parallels changes in the population,” Kitch points out. “Because more and more young girls participate in sports since Title IX made it perfectly normal, people don’t know there was a time when that wasn’t the case. It is now a normal part of a young woman’s socialization to play sports.”

On the entertainment front, Kitch observes that the plots of books, television shows, and movies often feature four women: the smart, quirky woman; the sexy, dangerous

woman; the self-sacrificing woman; and the sweet, perky girl next door. This treatment can be seen from the original *Little Women* story to the more recent *Designing Women*, *Sex and the City*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. In contrast, the typical male plotline features a single man succeeding in making his way in the world, Kitch says.

“The four women who are friends somehow embody the feminist geist of their age,” Kitch points out. Currently, some story concepts are changing to portray women as the primary breadwinner, such as the TV show *Parenthood*, which features a woman lawyer and her stay-at-home husband.

Other television programs such as *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Dancing with the Stars* “don’t show women as professionals and using their minds,” Beasley says. “They emphasize women as sexual beings. When women become too assertive, society operates to put women back in their place,” she adds.

After World War II, a media campaign was launched to prompt women to return home after working in war plants. Today, a campaign of conservative voices favors men in charge and suggests that women should be back in the home, Beasley observes. “It is almost as though there is a social undercurrent to prop up men by making women still subservient as sexual objects or domestic individuals.”

Some images of powerful, successful, and strong women can be found in movies, “but they have not done particularly well at the box office,” Tripp notes. “You do have the smaller or independent films that [portray] different, multifaceted women. These films show the completion of one woman,” she adds.

### Appearance Is Still Everything

The media, especially movies and television, continues to focus heavily on a woman’s appearance. “If you look at television, you are going to

think that everyone is beautiful,” Tripp says. “If you watch the CW network, you would think everyone was 20 years old with three boy-friends,” she adds.

“It’s an impulse of our society to sexualize women to bring more eyeballs to the tables,” Lowen says.

Some advertisers still exhibit this gender bias in their advertisements, experts observe, while others are opting to portray women of different shapes and sizes. “You see a lot more variety. You see a lot more ethnic representation of women in ads,” Tripp says, but “we still have a ways to go.”

A recent large department store ad showed a young girl folding towels near a toy washer and dryer. “We are already training them in the same traditional gender roles that have been around forever,” Baldwin says. Other ads objectify women. “That is not getting any better. It is getting worse,” she laments. “So much of what is out there is still very biased in the roles [assigned] and the ways we portray women. It has a profound effect on women growing up in the world.”

Beasley criticizes toy ads that use images of little girls who “look like prostitutes” and feature gender-specific toys such as nail polish, dress-up items for girls, and separate toys for boys. She says these ads sexualize the girls and promote the image of boys as “big and strong.”

However, some advertisers recently launched “real women campaigns” featuring older, heavier, tall, or short women—a diverse group promoting products such as Dove soap. “If you want to attract consumers, you need to target that market,” Tripp explains, adding that viewers need to be able to imagine themselves using a particular product.

Reflecting on the past 30 years, Parcell says advertising today portrays women in more powerful positions outside the home. “You are more likely to see ads in which the women are breadwinners as well as their husbands. In some ads the woman is the breadwinner, and the man stays

at home,” she notes. “One way you can attract consumers and get them to pay attention to your ad is to have [an individual] in the ad who is similar to the viewer so the consumer sees someone who is like her or the person she would like to be.”

Women with high-paying jobs who are prominent household buyers are a key market segment. One home improvement store ran a recent ad that, rather than showing a damsel in distress, featured women performing home improvement tasks themselves. “You can’t make money if you tick off your target audience,” Parcell says.

Television, movies, and ads also play to young women in their 20s because “young women are a hugely important marketing demographic,” according to Kitch. “They haven’t chosen their brands yet. They are depicted more positively or realistically.” But this is temporary, she adds, “because the expectation is that [young women] will leave the workforce.”

### Voices in the New Media

The world of blogging is an up-and-coming area for women’s voices—and for uncontrolled stereotyping. “New types of media have given a voice to people who didn’t have the power and who didn’t own a press,” Kitch says.

The number of women blogging is growing quickly. BlogHer, a media site that provides access to women’s blogs, hosts an annual convention for women bloggers. These conventions are filled with vendors trying to get their products connected with “mommy blogs” and others.

However, some websites, such as Gawker, continue to demean women in the *Mad Men* 1960s style—with extreme disrespect and offense. To many observers, this begs the question: “Has the media really come a long way in 50 years, or is the portrayal of women stuck in the *Mad Men*’s bygone era?” 🗨️

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