



# **Women Leaders and the Media: Journey to the Top**

**Beijing +20: Women and the Media**

**CEDAW: Article 5 -  
Sex Role Stereotyping and Prejudice**

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### Introduction

In today's society, there is a definite progression of women's rights, but many times this progression is only seen with very obvious issues. When it comes to the media, the representation of women is oftentimes overlooked and is not seen to be an important issue in comparison to other issues including abortion, equal pay, etc. Female leaders are not portrayed in the same light as their male counterparts. This research will expound upon women in the media, more specifically, females in political leadership positions and how they are portrayed. To make a difference, to ratify CEDAW, we need more female leaders. We need more women in positions of power to make these very important changes. My research aims to do just that, by studying how to empower women to pursue positions of leadership. But first, it is necessary to understand how female leaders are being depicted in the media and consequently in our society.

### **Women Leaders in the Media: Local (North Carolina), National (The United States) and Global**

Several books and articles have provided the necessary information to understand the differences between men and women political leaders in the media. The book titled *Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership: Women Political Leaders and the Media* by Donatella Campus not only expounds upon these differences, but also provides local evidence along with national and global evidence. First and foremost, Campus explains that there are two characteristics of the media coverage: quality and quantity. In the past, the quantity of female political leaders in the media was significantly less than their male counterparts. Nowadays, there is more coverage of female political leaders; however there is still an obvious difference. In the 2008 Presidential Campaign, Hillary Clinton was covered less than Barack Obama even when she was leading in the polls (Campus, pg. 40). In the 2007 Presidential Election in France, Segolene Royal



was covered less than her male opponent, Nicolas Sarkozy. Campus emphasized the fact that the gap seen in quantity of coverage is lessening as the years go by (Campus, pg. 40).

The quality of the coverage is the next characteristic that is significant to media portrayals. When female political leaders are showcased in the media, the focus is on their appearance and relationships. According to Campus, “A body of research conducted on content of media messages in U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races consistently shows that the media link preferably “male issues” (i.e., military, foreign politics, economy) to male candidates and “female issues” (education, welfare, health care) to female candidates (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Bystrom et al. 2004, 179– 811). These findings are in line with the hypothesis that gender stereotypes on personal traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of expertise (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a)” (Campus, pg. 41). Because these “male issues” receive more press than the “female issues” they are deemed to be more important which is what results in the consistent election of males. Even if the female politicians’ policies emphasize defense and the economy, the media does not focus on these aspects which ultimately affects their careers negatively.

In addition, Campus clarifies the prejudice that is put in place on female politicians. Male politicians are more likely to be portrayed in the media as more in tune with economics and defense whereas female opponents are not. This of course hinders the female politicians’ success, not only because a nation’s defense and economy are the significant issues in a campaign, but also because others perceive women as being unable to lead in these areas of government. There are many characteristics that are gender stereotyped in the media especially regarding politicians. For example, females are showcased to be more caring whereas males are showcased as more competent. When voting, who are the citizens more likely to vote for? A caring candidate or a competent candidate?

In the article, “Gender, Candidate Portrayals and Election Campaigns: A Comparative Perspective” by Miki Caul Kittilson and Kim Fridkin, candidates all over the globe were examined to



understand media portrayals around the world. Kittilson and Fridkin also include evidence of media biases in North Carolina. When Elizabeth Dole pursued the Presidential Bid in 2000, the media did not help her succeed. Instead, Dole's personal traits whether it was her appearance, personality, relationships, etc. were more newsworthy than her policies and plans to further American success (Kittleson & Fridkin, pg. 373).

Kittilson and Fridkin found similar information to Campus in the quality of coverage of the female candidates. They focused on American media along with Australian and Canadian media and came to the conclusion that gender stereotypes are prominent. The characteristics that were used to describe female politicians included compassionate and honest whereas the male characteristics revolved around leadership and experience. The characteristics were not the only stereotypes that were prevalent. The policies were also divided based on gender. Female political leaders were portrayed as having more of a focus on healthcare, education, and poverty. Male political leaders were portrayed as having more of a focus on trade, economy, foreign policy, and defense. What is important to note is the fact that the specific "female policies" were characterized to be more feminine than masculine, which ultimately made them seem less important and significant. Finally, the same aspects of the female political leaders that Campus expounded upon were also found in the research of Kittilson and Fridkin. The media focused on the female leaders' marital status, family dynamics, appearance, personality, and personal life instead of centering the information on their policies and what they intend to do for their countries (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008).

Another resource that provides information and solutions to this gender bias within the media is the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The website explains what the institute is and what it does by stating it was, "founded by Academy Award®-winning actress and advocate Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to engage,



educate, and influence the need to dramatically improve gender balance, reduce stereotyping and create diverse female characters in entertainment targeting children 11 and under” (Geena Davis Institute Website). The Institute focuses on research and education in addition to advocacy, which is the key difference. Research and knowledge is vital to making changes, but actually taking initiative to make these changes is the most important aspect that Geena Davis encourages. Celebrities understand the biases and imbalances associated with Hollywood, which is what makes this Institute impactful. To understand the problems associated with the movies and shows produced every day and to make a change for the better, for the equality of men and women, for the eradication of female stereotypes, is a significant and vital project.

Here is a table representing the quantity of females in the media nationally:

*“From January through December, 2013, men accounted for roughly 74 percent of elected officials, candidates and journalists appearing on weekly political round-ups broadcast on the ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC networks” (The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2014).*

### *Sunday Talk Shows*

<i>ABC This Week</i>	<i>453 guests</i>	<i>327 men (72%)</i>	<i>126 women (28%)</i>
<i>CBS Face Nation</i>	<i>448 guests</i>	<i>335 men (75%)</i>	<i>113 women (25%)</i>
<i>Fox News Sunday</i>	<i>367 guests</i>	<i>279 men (76%)</i>	<i>88 women (24%)</i>
<i>NBC Meet Press</i>	<i>396 guests</i>	<i>298 men (75%)</i>	<i>98 women (25%)</i>
<i>CNN State Union</i>	<i>379 guests</i>	<i>272 men (72%)</i>	<i>107 women (28%)</i>

*Source: Women & Politics Institute Sunday Morning Monitor, American University School of Public Affairs*

To understand the significant impact of female portrayal in the media on the election of women into office, it is necessary to understand the current level of female representation. In North Carolina, because of the small number of women in legislature, it is number 28 out of all fifty states in terms of the



number of women in the state legislature. This also means that North Carolina does not pass the national rate of women in legislatures (IWPR Publication). Additionally, as of 2014, only 21.9% of women were in parliament globally, contrasting to 11.3% twenty years ago (UN Women). There is a lot of hard work that needs to be done to change this media portrayal of women so that more women will be elected to their governments locally, nationally, and globally.

### **Beijing Platform for Action**

One of the strategic objectives and actions of the Beijing Platform for Action is Women and the Media. The research I conducted helps further this action and provides more information for the advocacy society. According to the Beijing Platform for Action, there are actions that need to be taken to help better the status of women in the media. The actions can be taken by governments, organizations, the media, non-governmental sectors, and the private sphere. The actions are different depending on who is taking them and they range from a research-oriented approach to having more women making decisions.

In order for the global society to make a difference and to provide a world for the future generations that not only respects women in the media, but provides a safe space that does not constrain women in any way, the actions listed above must be taken. There have been many issues with women and the media. Not only were women portrayed in the media significantly less than men, but they were also belittled, and oftentimes ridiculed, if they strayed from customary “feminine qualities.” In addition to this, there were many biases against the women who were present in the media which motivated women to begin their own news outlets. When the Beijing Platform for Action was signed, there were definite steps that were taken in the positive direction even though there were still issues within the media that needed to be corrected especially underrepresentation of women in the media. Twenty years after the Beijing Platform for Action was signed, there have been many advancements made regarding women and the media. There are more women in the media, whether they are the interviewee or interviewer, and media outlets are



slowly taking women political leaders more seriously. Nevertheless, the media has a long journey ahead before equality will be achieved for women in the media (Women in the World Today).

### **Partner Organizations (Best Fit Models)**

In order for women to become successful leaders within the political sphere, there is a process that is necessary from a very young age until they reach adulthood. Without support (empowerment), the proper environment, and education, it is difficult for women to become leaders of their communities. Because this research deals with women leaders and how they are portrayed in the media, I decided to choose partner organizations that empower young girls to pursue leadership positions and to become successful in their endeavors. Raising a generation of youth who is aware of the media and the issues involving the media will allow them to become agents of change and ultimately, our future leaders. Because these organizations are instrumental in teaching girls about a range of subjects including body image, how to be successful in school, and even lessons on the media, the girls have a better understanding of issues they will face as they get older and pursue their educations and careers. If the girls are prepared for what they will undoubtedly see, especially regarding women in the media, they will overcome these issues and even be catalysts of change, to make the media less stereotypical and more equal towards women.

The more organizations that support girls to become successful, the more women leaders we will have at the local level, national level, and global level. The three non-profit organizations that I partnered with are three local organizations called Girls on the Run, Girls Rock NC, and Girl Talk Foundation Incorporated. The reason there are three partner organizations is to showcase all ranges of females involved within these types of organizations. Girls on the Run allows elementary-school aged girls to join their program. Girls Rock NC allows girls from elementary school up until high school (7-15) to join. Finally, Girl Talk Foundation Inc. allows high school- aged girls (13-16) to participate. I will explain the



foundation of each organization and ultimately expound upon how these organizations help women pursue leadership positions.

These partner organizations are taking the steps outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action in order to achieve equality between women and men within the media. The organizations are “[promoting] the concept that the sexist stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory, degrading in nature and offensive” (UNWomen) in addition to “[developing] a gender perspective on all issues of concern to communities, consumers and civil society” (UNWomen). The organizations are being proactive by teaching the girls these important concepts when they are young and impressionable. The hope is that these organizations will guide their participants to lead successful lives, especially while undertaking leadership positions that can ultimately lead to the ratification of CEDAW in all countries of the world in addition to many more advancements.

### **Girls on the Run**

Girls on the Run is an organization that was started in Charlotte, North Carolina, but has grown and spread all over North America. The program that I was in contact with is based in Durham, North Carolina and caters to the triangle area (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina). The program is a 12-week research-based curriculum that occurs in both the fall and the spring. The groups consist of 15-20 girls and 3 coaches with meetings occurring twice a week (Girls on the Run Triangle). I spoke with Juliellen Simpson-Vos, the executive director of Girls on the Run of the Triangle. Simpson-Vos said the purpose and mission of GOTR is “to empower girls to be joyful, confident, and healthy!” She explained that the program aims to show the girls that they can make a difference and contribute to their societies.

When discussing the challenges seen throughout the program, Simpson-Vos clarified by stating the problems that are seen in middle schools and high schools are now prevalent in elementary schools. Girls in elementary school are dealing with issues that are above their age, which can be very difficult for





them. GOTR uses physical activity along with specific lessons to teach the girls to think positive and to recognize their abilities to realize their potential. At the end of the program, the girls participate in the GOTR 5K event. The GOTR program allows the girls to recognize their own voices, inevitably teaching them about leadership. They are required to complete a community service project at the end of the program which also teaches them about leadership. There is a new program that is being launched called Girls on Track which is aimed at middle-school aged girls. The coaches that are a part of GOTR must be 18 years of age or older; however, there are junior coaches between the ages of 16 and 18. The girls are also taught a lesson on media and how to recognize whether certain friendships make your life better or not (Simpson-Vos). This program is truly a great way to empower young girls and to help them deal with the issues that they will undoubtedly go through as they grow up. The following is a quote from the Girls on the Run Website that explains the organization's accomplishments:

*“With the help of over 55,000 volunteers, the Girls on the Run program is now serving over 130,000 girls in 200+ cities across North America each year. In 2012, Girls on the Run hosted 253 end-of-season 5k events across the United States and Canada. Girls on the Run has been featured in many media outlets including People, Runner’s World, Redbook, Women’s Day, O Magazine, Fitness Magazine, Self Magazine, Glamour, Shape, Marie Claire, Parenting, Running Times, CNN, MSNBC, ABC News, NBC News, NPR and ESPN” (Girls on the Run).*

### **Girls Rock NC**

Girls Rock NC is an organization based in central North Carolina that has several prominent components including Summer Rock Camps, After School Programs, and even Rock Retreat Weekends. I interviewed Collier Reeves, the director of operations and programming at Girls Rock NC. Reeves explained the mission of Girls Rock NC by saying, “Girls Rock North Carolina is an organization in central North Carolina that empowers girls and women -- through creative expression -- to become confident and engaged members of our communities.” Reeves also described what occurs at the Summer Rock Camp by declaring, “Most of the girls are part of the summer rock camp. There they select instruments, form bands, write original music, take workshops like body confidence, song writing, DIY



clothes, self-defense, zine making, the history of women in music, etc. The biggest, most exceptional thing about Rock Camp is the end of camp showcase. It's usually at a local venue, the girls wear their DIY band gear and perform their songs to a huge audience. It's amazing and super inspiring to see and hear them perform.”

The girls who are involved with Girls Rock NC are between the ages of 7 and 15; however, there are teen intern programs and a program called the Teen AXN League for girls 16-18 years of age. What is great about Girls Rock NC is the fact that they also have a program for adults looking for an outlet as well, which is called the Rock Retreat Weekend (Girls Rock North Carolina). The volunteers involved must be 18 years or older. According to Reeves, one of the biggest challenges they face is a lack of space, limited funding, and a lack of experience. They have to rent out the spaces they use for all of their programs (Reeves).

What is important to note is that Girls Rock NC includes workshops that help girls with their self-confidence by having conversations about the negative aspects of media and culture. The fact that the girls are not allowed to be critical of themselves and are only allowed to say positive comments is very helpful. Chants are put in place to help with more positivity. Reeves gave me an example including, ““Hey friends, what's your instrument??!” Reply: "It's my voice!" And, "My body's nobody's body but mine. You run your own body, let me run mine!" In addition to this, the girls are taught how to make their own decisions and to be confident in those choices especially through their role models in the programs (Reeves). This organization truly makes a difference in all the participants’ lives. The following is a quote from the Girls Rock NC Website explaining the organization’s successes:

*“In our ten years of programming, GRNC NC has held over forty music programs for girls in Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh. Our campers have gone on to perform in successful bands and even take on leadership positions at camp. GRNC has roughly 80 active volunteers and a growing number of partners, sponsors, musicians, parents, activists, and mentors working together to build a strong community” (Girls Rock North Carolina).*



### **Girl Talk Foundation Incorporated**

Girl Talk Foundation Inc. is based in Charlotte, NC. I interviewed the executive director/founder of the organization, Janine Davis and I also made a trip to Charlotte, NC for Career Day (part of the 16-week Curriculum). Girls from all schools are welcome as long as they are between the ages of 13 and 16. Girl Talk is a program that takes place for 16 weeks from August until December every year. The girls meet once a week on Saturday mornings. Janine Davis explained what the girls learn by stating, “The curriculum focuses on building self-confidence, enhancing social and community skills and acquiring skills to self-manage.” According to Davis, the mission of Girl Talk is “to empower every girl to find her voice to become the success she is destined to be - confident, smart, proud and powerful. We provide girls with the skills they need to excel in the workplace and use their skills to strengthen their communities” (Davis). Not only are the girls taught essentials to succeed, but Girl Talk also helps with their self-esteem and self-worth. The volunteers who are necessary throughout the 16-week curriculum are college students and adult women in the work field that range in ages from 21-50 (Girl Talk Foundation, Inc).

When I visited Charlotte for Career Day, I witnessed first-hand how the programs help the girls. During Career Day, mock interviews with the girls were conducted. The girls had to dress up in business attire and hand write thank you cards to their interviewers once they were finished, which they personally delivered to their interviewers. Additionally, there was a career panel of adults in professions ranging from doctors to radio directors. The girls asked questions that would help guide them when making future decisions about college to reach their career dreams. To have these girls participate in mock interviews at such young ages is truly crucial. What makes this organization exceptional is the fact that all aspects of



life are covered in the curriculum. Not only are the girls exposed to Career Day but they also take part in the Jewels Program which is where they hold offices (including President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer) and spearhead community service projects and fundraising efforts. They also participate in the Prom Project which teaches the girls proper etiquette when dining and in various social situations (Girl Talk Foundation, Inc). Girl Talk is a phenomenal organization that undoubtedly helps girls pursue leadership positions when they get older. The following is a quote from the Girl Talk Foundation Website that explains the organization's impact:

*“Annually, Girl Talk Foundation, Inc. impacts nearly 700 girls through programming and special events” (Girl Talk Foundation Incorporated).*

### **Conclusion/Solution**

The problems in the media include the quality and quantity of coverage when portraying women. Stereotypes are projected on female political leaders and oftentimes hinder their political agendas. In addition to the stereotypes, less coverage of women is a huge problem as well. When the media portrays women leaders as having more “feminine qualities” it takes away from their careers, which not only holds them back, but it also places a stigma on having “feminine qualities.” We have progressed in the sense that there is an increased quantity of female coverage and there is a decreasing division between what it means to be feminine or masculine. There are still many setbacks and challenges because of the prominent pop culture that reduces females to their bodies and sexuality. We need to use programs such as Girls on the Run, Girls Rock NC, and Girl Talk Foundation Incorporated to empower women to become leaders and the best versions of themselves. We also need to support organizations such as the Geena Davis Institute to promote this goal of achieving equality for women within the media.

### **Impact of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**

A governmental side event I attended at CSW was titled Women in Political Leadership – Achieving Equality in Political Decision-Making. The objective of the event was to discuss the barriers

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for women in political leadership. The panelists consisted of female political leaders from different countries including Algeria, Chile, Australia, Switzerland, and South Africa. It was fascinating to see female political leaders mentioning the exact issues of representation in the media that I completed my research on. The Mayor of Zurich, Switzerland, Corine Mauch, stated that many of the reports that were released when she was first elected dealt with her appearance. To go to the United Nations for CSW and have all of my research reaffirmed shows how significant it is for there to be a worldwide change in media portrayals of women. We need to work together to change the world we live in, to make it more equitable for women everywhere.



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