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[On Hillary Clinton, Sexism, and U.S. Foreign Policy](#)

Feminists who oppose Hillary Clinton's imperialism can't just challenge her foreign policy. We have to challenge the sexist attacks against her, too.

After strong early primary showings by Senator Bernie Sanders, a few high-profile supporters of his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton have seized upon an explanation: sexism — and not only by men. Sanders' high level of support from young women in particular, they say, reflects the naiveté of younger self-identified feminists.

Feminist icon [Gloria Steinem](#), for example, claimed that younger women backing Sanders simply wanted the attention of young men on the Sanders campaign: “When you're young, you're thinking, where are the boys?” Steinem said. “The boys are with Bernie.”

Huffington Post blogger [Kathleen Reardon](#), for her part, claims young women prefer Sanders because they're at a phase in their careers where “when mentors aren't hard to find, colleagues (including men) are often helpful, and the world seems like a place where hard work will surely enable them to grasp the brass ring.” They won't recognize the severity of institutionalized sexism, Reardon suggests, until they're no longer “cute and little.”

[Amy Chozik and Yamiche Alcindor](#) piled on in the *New York Times*, insisting that younger women just don't “get” sexism like older women. They only support Sanders, the authors seem to say, because they're not engaged enough.

At worst, these critics accuse their younger counterparts of betrayal. There's a “special place in hell,” former secretary of state [Madeline Albright](#) warned, for women who don't back the leading female presidential contender.

While Hillary Clinton has overcome a great deal of sexism in her professional life, disingenuous charges like these ignore the many ways in which her positions on key issues — particularly regarding foreign policy — have been deleterious for women.

[Dana Bolger](#), an editor for *Feministing*, counters for many young women who support Sanders, “their rejection of Clinton is informed and deeply political. Many of them have suffered violence, discrimination, and rampant unemployment. They have drawn upon their feminist commitments, alongside lived experience, to evaluate and reject Clinton's hawkish foreign policy, her expansion of drone warfare, gutting of welfare, (continuing) defense of a burgeoning surveillance state, and more — all of which have hurt women in the U.S. and abroad.”

There's growing pushback from young feminist supporters of Bernie Sanders against the condescending criticism of older Clinton supporters, noting that they're indeed quite aware of institutionalized sexism, but prefer to choose candidates based on the issues. They've seen friends and family members killed, maimed, and psychologically damaged by being sent to fight in an illegal and unnecessary war in Iraq, which Hillary Clinton enthusiastically supported. They see how the enormous financial costs of that war and its aftermath have taken money away from education, jobs, and other programs that impact women. And they're attracted to Sanders' desire to help build a more just and equitable economic system.

The generational divide is borne out in the early voting results. Sanders won a solid majority of women who voted in the New Hampshire Democratic primary. Exit polls showed 69 percent of women under 45 backed Sanders — a figure that rose to [82 percent of those under 30](#) — while Clinton won the votes of 56 percent of women 45 and older.

All of which raises two important questions: Why do older women prefer Clinton? And what's the appropriate response for feminist critics of her foreign policy?

Why Support Hillary?

It may be disappointing to see some politically left-leaning women offering their support to Clinton, despite her militaristic foreign policy positions and pro-corporate economic agenda. But many of us who share that view — perhaps especially those of us who are men — underestimate the powerful allure of electing a female president in a pervasively sexist society.

Clinton has personally endured an endless slew of gendered attacks — from demeaning depictions in political cartoons to questions regarding her temperament to commentaries about her hair, clothes, voice, marriage, and whatever else — along with pseudo-scandals over Benghazi and her emails. These sexist attacks have put millions of women on the defensive, even those who would otherwise not be prone to support her based upon her policy positions. There's an understandable fear that if Clinton is again denied the nomination, in part as a result of sexism, it would discourage other women from running for president any time in the near future.

That would be a major setback in the struggle for women's rights indeed. But that doesn't change the fact that several things about Clinton's record would make her an unusual standard bearer for that cause.

Historically, it's uncommon for women voters — who statistically tend to be [more dovish on foreign policy matters](#) than men — to support the most hawkish candidate in the Democratic primaries. Indeed, Clinton is the only one of the six original and two remaining Democratic candidates for the 2016 presidential nomination to have supported the invasion of Iraq.

Still, some female Clinton supporters may hold on to the belief that she's more progressive than she's letting on — and that she simply has to appear tough on foreign policy to overcome sexist attitudes about having a female commander-in-chief in a time of war. This belief may be naïve, but anecdotal evidence suggests it's widely held among liberal and progressive Democrats of all demographics — and particularly among women middle-aged and older.

All that's to say, a major reason for the strong support Clinton enjoys among older progressive women may simply be a reaction to the omnipresent sexism in American society. Indeed, older women have likely experienced more institutionalized sexism in the workplace and elsewhere than their younger counterparts. To the extent that their support for Clinton is based on identity politics, that's no big surprise in a nation that's had nothing but male leaders at the helm for its entire 240-year history.

Women and War

But the subject is murkier when it comes to examining the actual impacts Clinton's policies have had on women — an impact that's arguably felt more deeply abroad than in the United States.

Feminists with an interest in foreign policy are divided on the prospects of a Hillary Clinton presidency. Many rightly applaud her advocacy for global feminist concerns, like education and reproductive health, as secretary of state. The question is: Do these issues make up for her more problematic foreign policy positions — particularly as compared to the more progressive foreign policy agenda of Senator Bernie Sanders?

For example, the Iraq War, made possible in part through Clinton's vote to authorize the invasion, has been a disaster for Iraqi women. The secular regime overthrown by U.S. forces was replaced by Islamist fundamentalists, and the ensuing sectarian civil war has produced horrific cases of sexual violence — including not least the enslavement of women by extremist groups like the Islamic State. Clinton also backed Israel's massive 2006 assault on Lebanon, as well as the 2009 and 2014 wars on the Gaza Strip, which killed many hundreds of female non-combatants.

Given that modern warfare results in far more civilian than military casualties, women are often its primary victims. Despite Clinton's strong record of supporting women's rights in the United States and in certain overseas programs, her militaristic disposition has arguably made life worse for millions of women outside of her constituency.

Bad Company

It's not even just the wars: As secretary of state, Clinton spearheaded the U.S. embrace of a number of deeply problematic regimes abroad.

For example, she supported the 2009 coup in Honduras, which resulted in a dramatic upsurge in violence against women, with prominent female peasant leaders, union organizers, and indigenous rights advocates among the victims. She's called for closer strategic ties with Saudi Arabia, the most misogynist government on the planet. She supported Bahrain's brutal crackdown on its pro-democracy movement, including prominent women leaders. And Yemeni human rights activist Tawakkol Karman, who was awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership in the country's pro-democracy movement, has spoken out against then-Secretary Clinton's lack of support in the struggle against the U.S.-backed autocratic regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

A particularly egregious case of Hillary Clinton's selective support for the rights of women is her strong support for the autocratic monarchy in Morocco.

For example, in 2012 — during the height of a local campaign to repeal an article of the Moroccan penal code that absolves a male rapist if he consents to marry his victim — Clinton praised the Moroccan government for having “protected and expanded” women's rights. Just weeks after Clinton commended the regime, Amina Filali — a 16-year old Moroccan girl who'd been raped at the age of 15 and forced to marry her rapist, who subsequently battered and abused her — burned herself to death.

Similarly, it was not long after a previous visit to Morocco, where she also praised the autocratic monarchy's human rights record, that the regime illegally expelled [Aminatou Haidar](#) — known to some as the “Saharan Gandhi” — for her leadership in the nonviolent resistance struggle against the illegal Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.

Haidar — a winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award who'd previously spent years being tortured in Moroccan prisons — went on a month-long hunger strike, which almost killed her, before Morocco relented to international pressure and allowed her to return. Amnesty International has accused the Moroccan government of systematically engaging in sexual torture and other abuse against female Saharawi political prisoners in the occupied territory.

Global Feminism in an Imperialist Context

It's no secret that patriarchal men have inflicted enormous damage on the world. But a quick look at a few of the more prominent women who've taken leadership roles in U.S. foreign affairs — [Jeanne Kirkpatrick](#), Madeleine Albright, and [Condoleezza Rice](#), for instance — suggests that women can also be forceful advocates for U.S. imperialism. And, as Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain demonstrated, electing a female head of government doesn't guarantee a more compassionate foreign policy either.

Clinton supporters counter that Thatcher — unlike Clinton — never had much support from feminists in her country, and didn't have a history of supporting women's rights in general. Since Clinton has such a stronger base among women and a more robust record in support of women's rights domestically, they say, there's reason for hope. But it's hard to imagine

how Clinton would find a way to pay for many programs to help women at home or abroad, given how much she wants to increase military spending and expand U.S. hegemony.

In fact, given Clinton's history of backing neoliberal economic policies and war-making by the United States and its allies, her advocacy of women's rights overseas — within what is widely seen outside this country as an imperialist context — could actually set back indigenous feminist movements, just as U.S. support for dictatorial regimes in the Middle East gave little credibility to President George W. Bush's pro-democracy rhetoric.

For instance, would a President Hillary Clinton's call for greater respect for women's rights in the Arab world have much credibility while U.S.-manufactured ordnance is blowing up women in Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq? The question is especially salient given Clinton's refusal to accept moral responsibility for the humanitarian, fiscal, and strategic disaster that resulted from her support for the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq — an ongoing stumbling block I examined in a recent column, "[The Five Lamest Excuses for Hillary Clinton's Vote to Invade Iraq.](#)"

Challenging Sexism and Imperialism

I've long considered myself a feminist: One of my earliest presidential campaigns was in 1972 on behalf of New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who was — quite unlike Clinton — the most progressive Democrat in the race for the nomination that year.

But I also understand that it's difficult for me, as someone who identifies as both feminist and male, to criticize the feminist credentials of a candidate who could very well become the first woman to lead our country. Indeed, as a result of my personal opposition to Clinton's candidacy — particularly her militaristic foreign policy agenda — I've been repeatedly accused of being sexist.

I want to emphasize that my disagreements with Clinton are purely over policy. And I condemn outright the sexist attacks lobbed at her from the left as well as the right. But it's important to understand where this critique comes from.

As a result of the vehemence of the anger and distrust many of us direct at Hillary Clinton — for her support for the Iraq war, her support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and numerous Arab dictators, her poor record on human rights, and her indifference to international humanitarian law, among other issues — it can be easy for male critics especially to forget just how serious the misogynist attacks against Clinton have been. For millions of women, it must look all too familiar to the sexist mistreatment they've experienced personally. Like the fear of walking alone at night and the constant harassment of catcalls, there are certain fears and experiences about being a woman in a sexist society that I'll never be able to appreciate fully.

Indeed, I've begun to recognize that I sometimes "forget" that Hillary Clinton is a woman as well as a policymaker. That's not a sign of a lack of sexism on my part: It's a lack of awareness that contributes to the climate of sexism that's permeated the campaign.

This doesn't mean that antiwar voters shouldn't criticize Clinton. It means we need to recognize that not all Clinton supporters — particularly those motivated by a reaction to right-wing sexism — embrace her militaristic foreign policy agenda.

These supporters don't need to hear lectures on Clinton's feminist credentials, especially not from men. But if we want to dispel the denial of just how far to the right Clinton's international agenda is, those of us on the left need to acknowledge how serious a problem sexism remains in American society — and how it's manifesting itself in the personal attacks against Hillary Clinton. We must listen, listen, and listen some more to women who raise these concerns, and challenge such sexism whenever and wherever we come across it.

And we must remember that the issues that face us today — from sexism to imperialism — are much greater than anything that can be resolved by electing a new president alone.