



A Handy Guide for Calling Out and Shutting Down Sexism in Politics

As Malcolm Gladwell explores in *Blink*, we often rely on unconscious beliefs and assessments to make snap decisions—we think without thinking. Oftentimes biases are so ingrained in our thinking that we don't even notice that they are there; influencing our perceptions, preferences, and gatekeeping.

Many of us experience sexism at some point in our lives or careers. Running for office is, unfortunately, no different. In many cases running for office puts women in the public eye and vulnerable to public scrutiny that has nothing to do with their intellect, their policy plans, or their qualifications--but instead focuses on traditional roles and biases that women do not belong in political leadership. Tackling this issue takes intentional effort from all of us.

This is a list of common phrases and how to respond in a way that highlights sexism and offers an alternative thought. While engaging in this work may not immediately change everyone, or anyone's, mind it does have the power to call out sexism and invite others to be more thoughtful when similar thoughts or ideas show up in themselves or in their sphere.

She's too emotional/crazy/irrational.

Calling anyone emotional, crazy, or irrational is a way to dismiss their views and justify total disagreement with the person in question. When we discredit women in this way we distract from their ideas, policies, and vision. Since words like “crazy” and “emotional” are almost exclusively reserved to discredit women, they also underscore a bias of men being inherently superior to women.

When you hear comments like this (or notice them in yourself) here are ways to call out the behavior:

What makes you say that?

Can you explain it to me?

We all experience emotions, is there something about her experience that you disagree with?

What was it about her behavior that made you choose that word?

Do you believe this behavior disqualifies her from being an elected official?

Can you explain what part of her statement you think is wrong?

Tips for candidates:

I'm eager to understand your feedback, can you explain what part of my plan you disagree with?

Referring to me as “crazy/emotional/etc.” is distracting from the issue at hand. I am speaking about [insert topic] is there something specific about that issue you would like to discuss with me?

Who is at home with the children?

There seems to be an endless number of questions or assumptions that assume women as primary or exclusive caregivers. Many women are accustomed to the questions of “when are you having children?” “why don’t you want children?” and “who is watching your children?” The last question is typically asked whenever she attempts a venture that threatens to take her away from home.

The truth is that many politicians have also been fathers, some have chosen not to have children, and others are single. These life situations do not inhibit a person’s ability to serve well in elected office, and can sometimes be an asset.

When you hear comments like, “but who will take care of the children?” or “She’s trying to have it all”, here are some ways to respond:

Are you interested in knowing who will take care of her opponent’s children?

*This person isn’t trying to win a dating show, they’re running for office..
What do you know about her platform?*

There are multiple caregiving options available, I think it is safe to assume that she is using one of them. What can we discuss about her policy ideas?

I believe her experience as a parent will improve her ability to make informed decisions about policy.

Not all people want to be parents, that doesn’t have a bearing on whether or not they would be good elected officials.

Tips for candidates:

My family is aware of and supportive of my goals.

My partner and I have chosen a caregiving program that works for our family. I would like to spend time talking about this policy decision.



It is precisely my experience as a parent that has driven me to this role, so that I may advocate for the various experiences and needs for parents and children in our community.

Take a page out of Jacinda Ardern's book: "I am not the first woman to multitask. I am not the first woman to work and have a baby – there are many women who have done this before."

SEXIST REMARK #3

There's just something about her voice that I don't like.

As a society we have associated lower (male) voices with greater confidence, authority and wisdom. In contrast, higher voices are considered childlike, shrill, uninformed, or deferential. The truth is that the sound of our voices has no bearing on our intellect or ability to lead. Many times comments like this go unchecked, and simply calling attention to the comment can have a huge impact toward improving campaigns for women candidates.

Try phrases like this:

What do you mean?

Can you explain it to me?

Are you more interested in the sound of her voice or her ability to serve in this position?

What do you like or dislike about the things she is saying?

Here are her comments in print for you to read.

Do you know her stance on the issues?

Tips for candidates:

Remove qualifying words like “just” or “only”, example: I’m just a teacher.

Remind people that they don’t have to like your voice to like your ideas.

Focus on your record of accomplishments and your vision for change.

Don’t overthink criticism about features you cannot change about yourself.

For a short video about Talking While Female check out NPR, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDvPjm10CM0>.

And if it is any consolation, there is new research indicating that men with deeper voices are more likely to cheat: <https://news.sky.com/story/men-with-deep-voices-more-likely-to-cheat-new-research-shows-12098105>.

SEXIST REMARK #4

She doesn’t look like a candidate.

If you do an image search for “political candidate” you will see a flurry of photos almost entirely of men. Our mental image of leadership, especially in the political sphere, is often male, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and comes from money. Oftentimes women serving in office are the first woman to ever hold the position and all of this leads to a scenario where we assume that women are incompatible with politics. Thankfully, this is changing. We have had women candidates for presidential and vice-presidential positions. The 116th Congress has the highest percentage of women serving to date. Women are running for office in cities and states all across America.

While we are overcoming barriers to women’s political service, there is still a daunting task of undoing body and beauty standards that are hurled against



women. Everything from wardrobe selections to how often women smile can be used against them. In fact, even if the coverage is positive, any discussion about a woman candidate's appearance is detrimental to her favorability at the polls. These standards can show up in politics when people say that they can't picture us in these positions.

Here are some ways to combat that thinking:

These are the reasons [focus on her policies] that I think she is a quality candidate.

Have you studied her stance on the issues that matter most to you?

What do you think a candidate looks like?

Can you explain it to me?

By focusing on her appearance I assume you have no objections to what she is actually saying.

Tips for candidates:

Are you also interested in my addressing my opponents appearance (if opponent is a man).

Requesting that news outlets reprint material that is focused on appearance over issues.

Examples: discussion of make-up, clothing, hair, etc.

That comment/question is sexist and has no place in my campaign. Instead I would like to discuss [pivot to issue of relevance].

She's too bossy.

Assertiveness and ambition are not considered “traditionally feminine” qualities, yet they are necessary for effective leadership. When women or girls demonstrate leadership qualities, they are often labeled as “bossy” or “bitchy.” This is so pervasive that girls are twice as likely as boys to worry that leadership roles will make them seem bossy. When you hear derogatory language applied to women serving as leaders it is helpful to interject.

Here are some tips for everyone, candidates too:

Ask “would you have the same reaction if a man did the same thing?”

When in a room of leaders always make sure that you are hearing women participate in the conversation.

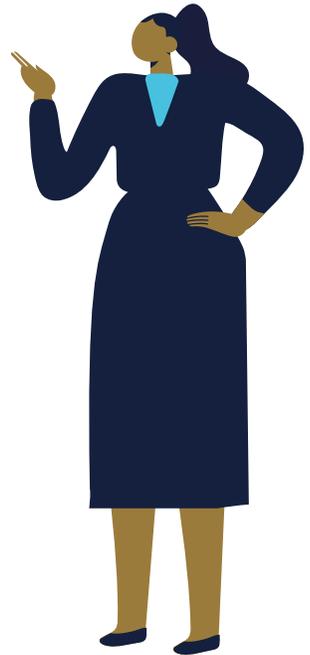
If there are no women leading, take note. Ask yourself and others what you are missing without the perspective of women’s leadership.

Check out this video about how to level the leadership playing field: <https://womensleadership.stanford.edu/level>

Remind young girls that they do not have to apologize for being leaders.

In realms where you are addressing adult women, do not call them girls. Infantilizing adults also diminishes our capacity to see them as leaders.

When you see others doing this, call them in. Address the issue, let them know that it is harmful to the success of others, and invite them to use different language in the future.



She's not likable enough to be elected.

In some ways, politics can feel like a popularity contest. People are looking to elect someone who they agree with and feel connected to. In several instances, this is where the “likability factor” can put women at a disadvantage. Dr. Pragya Agarwal is a behavioral scientist and award-winning author of ‘SWAY: Unravelling Unconscious Bias’. She shares, “there are two primary kinds of gender bias that affect women, called the descriptive and prescriptive bias. Descriptive bias is the labels we attach and associate with certain social groups and communities, and prescriptive bias is how they are expected to behave.

When someone does not conform to these prescribed roles and behaviors they can be penalized or punished. Women, for instance, are traditionally expected to be caring, warm, deferential, emotional, sensitive, and so on, and men are expected to be assertive, rational, competent, and objective. So, when it comes to [electability], these traits are sometimes automatically prescribed to people as per their gender without detailed information about their personalities, thereby a man, in general, is assumed to be a better fit as a leader.

The other side of this is prescriptive bias is when a woman does not fit the role that is traditionally assigned to her and attempts to claim a traditionally male position is seen as breaking the norm. So, when a woman is decisive, she might be perceived as “brusque” and “abrupt”. Therefore, for the same kind of leadership behavior, women might be penalized while a man is commended.” (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/10/23/not-very-likeable-here-is-how-bias-is-affecting-women-leaders/#6655c90295fd>)

Here are some ways you can interrupt these biases:

What exactly do you not like about this candidate?

Can you explain it to me?

Hasn't [name of another, likely male, candidate] done the same?

I feel like she is demonstrating _____ [assertiveness, clear decision-making, intelligence, etc] which I admire in a leader.

Do you think her policies/positions are strong enough to be elected?

Tips for candidates:

Focus on your vision and past achievements rather than trying to convince people that you are likeable.

Call out sexism as it is happening, especially with the press.

Highlight how your leadership qualities are an asset.