



## **Newsletter February 2007**

### **Female presidential leaders not as new as some may think**

*By Stephanie A. Rex*

Hillary Clinton is on her way to the White House and is ready to fight for it.

She's been ready.

But, she hasn't been the only woman to run in America's history, and if we take a look around the world, female presidential leadership is not exactly unheard of. In fact, France's leading presidential candidate, Segolene Royal, draws many parallels to Mrs. Clinton.

Both are currently the better half of political power couples, and both Royal and Clinton have made risky, but wise centrist moves in order to further their political advances. Most importantly, both have a shot at being the first female presidents in both of their prospective countries.

Royal, who is living with Socialist party leader Francoise Hollande, with whom she has four children, won her party's nomination last month by a landslide. One important difference here: her male partner is living in her political shadow, rather than it being the other way around.

[\(http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/11/16/french\\_hillary/\)](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/11/16/french_hillary/)

The most prominent distinction between Clinton and Royal is the way in which French society and American society reacts to their own doses of female power and ambition.

In France, the charismatic Royal is getting her first shot at the highest political position while her husband, who is viewed as mildly cold, didn't have a chance. In the States, the Clintons are viewed through a different lens. One fascinating component of Royal's campaign is that her strength is not considered a negative there, in fact the French adore her for her valor.

In 2000, CNN reported that the head of the New York state Republican Party charged that Clinton is "an angry woman driven by blind ambition." In the early 1990's it took Hillary years to move past her comment during her husband's presidential campaign that she wasn't going to "stay home and bake cookies."

Royal's status as a woman has seemed to politically help her and she is seen as being able to connect with voters on a more personal basis, while Clinton's being a woman is widely viewed as her biggest obstacle.

According to an NPR report, Royal is seen as "shaking up the boys' club," but when citizens made this remark to the NPR correspondent, you could hear the, "We love her for it!" tone in her voice. NPR also reported that when one of her opponents remarked in the past of her ambition, "who will look after the children?" that same rival now calls her, "a woman of quality."

What do these differences say about American society today? When someone asks, "are we ready for a female president?" are they really asking, "Is a woman ready, willing and able to lead the free world?" and more importantly is the country ready as a whole?

Is America as progressive as we would like to believe if we are still questioning the ability of women to hold the highest public office?

Germany, Chile and Liberia all currently have female presidents. Israel, India and even Pakistan have all had female presidents or prime ministers in the past. Just recently in Liberia, an

all-female peace-keeping force has been formed by the U.N., according to BBC News, and may have the power to reduce the sexual exploitation of women in that region with such powerful placement of the women themselves. This is the kind of visionary change that a female President can make happen.

There is still a long way to go in the pursuit of equality. While there is no doubt that Hillary has the qualifications and intelligence to become President her candidacy is still suspect because of biases and concerns that have their basis in outdated gendered stereotypes. Social concerns related to concepts of what are attractive or appropriate behaviors and leadership styles for women versus men. So, we must ask ourselves, why does America still view strength and ambition as negative characteristics for female leaders while other countries view those facets as appropriate and attractive in a leader? Why is the adjective, “assertive,” when applied to a female in the U.S., viewed as an uninviting and threatening quality in a woman, while in France, today it is a great compliment?

What will it take for female leadership to be viewed as a positive step toward a better, more equal and more diversely able-bodied society?

Here at WGF that means working towards common goals such as achieving equal pay for equal work, working to see more women’s faces on corporate boards and public board leadership, empowering young girls to use their voices to seed social change, and encouraging more women to pursue leadership opportunities in our community which will enable them to be active participants in making community decisions that can benefit the entire community.

The more women step out as leaders, and the more other women support them in doing so, the more community as a whole will benefit. As strong women leaders emerge, with the freedom to be strong, smart, and successful, the more young girls will learn that they need not

hide their ambitions to succeed. Ambition and drive can be powerful assets to a company, community and to those in political office. And the gender of the leader should not effect the perception of that leader's abilities.

What will it take for American society to be fully ready to trust women in the highest of offices? And, more importantly, when?

It is time for America to appreciate women for all that they are and all that they can be: strong, independent, mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, who are assertive, powerful, understanding, smart, successful, and now...presidential.