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How Much Did Hillary Clinton's Historic Run Really Break the Glass Ceiling?

She made it further than any other woman, but the barriers for a woman becoming president remain high

By *Liz Halloran*

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The grandmother's words were meant to encourage her smart young granddaughter. But the limitations of the long-ago, you-go-girl advice still make Toby Graff smile, if a bit ruefully. "My grandma always told me that I could grow up and be the first woman *vice* president," says Graff, 37, a Lifetime Networks executive who was a White House press aide to first lady Hillary Clinton.

It would be a tidy denouement if now Senator Clinton's whisker-close-but-losing battle to become the first woman major party presidential nominee convinced Graff that grandmothers like hers could envision a White House path repaved for women. Clinton, after all, won 21 primaries and a caucus, becoming the first woman ever to win even a single presidential contest in which delegates were at stake. Shirley Chisholm won three Democratic Party contests in 1972, but no delegates were up for grabs. In losing the Democratic race to Sen. Barack Obama, the first African-American major party nominee, Clinton came closer to capturing the prize than any woman before her, including Victoria Claflin Woodhull, who in 1872 became the first woman presidential candidate.

But though recent national polls, including one by Graff's own cable network, show that Clinton's effort made women significantly more optimistic that they would see a female president in their lifetime, Graff and others remain skeptical that persistent barriers to women in politics—from traditional child-rearing imperatives to a stark and enduring political ambition gap—have been altered in any lasting way by this year's contest.

And, like many, Graff saw Clinton not as an everywoman candidate, but as a unique and advantaged one with a substantial war chest, name recognition, and network of powerful operatives that dated from her husband's two White House terms. "She was not 'a' woman," Graff says. "She was 'the' woman."

Clinton's historic run against an equally historic candidate provides a lens through which to examine the reasons that no woman has cracked that ultimate glass ceiling, while western allies

like Britain had its Margaret Thatcher and Germany its Angela Merkel. And it illuminates the perplexing state of American women and politics, one in which Democrat Nancy Pelosi has been presiding as the first female Speaker of the House, but where the growth of women in statewide elective office has been largely stagnant for 15 years. It reveals a rift between many feminists of Clinton's generation, who viewed her candidacy as the culmination of the civil rights wars of the 1960s, and scores of younger women who showed little affinity for the senator from New York and what they saw as old-school identity politics. And it raises questions about where the once powerful women's movement, now showing evidence of fraying, will go post-Hillary Clinton.

The great divide. Marie Wilson, founder of the nonprofit White House Project, which has trained thousands of potential female leaders, says she has seen the young-old women's divide growing for more than a decade. "The closer women get to achieving power, the more conversation there is about that, and the more concern there is among some women about how men may react," Wilson says. And though she believes that Clinton's candidacy, and, in particular, some of the media coverage, reminded many that "sexism is alive and well," this year's Democratic contest suggests that a new, more diffuse and less partisan women's movement is unfolding. "We are at the end of a time when you only look at advocacy and victimization," says Wilson, 57. "We know darn well we're not there yet, but these young women are deeply thoughtful, and to go about getting power, we have to be united."

But getting that power and sustaining it is all about having prospects in the political pipeline. And that has remained a vexing issue, despite efforts of leaders like Wilson and former Ambassador Swanee Hunt, 58, founding director of the Women and Public Policy program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and president of her own foundation that works to develop women leaders. Though Hunt, appointed ambassador to Austria during the Clinton administration, says she sees progress, particularly in women assuming legislative leadership roles, the raw numbers suggest a mixed bag at best.

Data compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University show that the percentage of women serving in statewide elective offices, including governorships, and in state legislatures has been largely unchanged since 1993, when it hovered at just over 20 percent for both. This year, 23.7 percent of state legislators nationwide are women, as are 23.8 percent of statewide elected executives. In Congress, 72 of the 435 seats are held by women, and the 100-member U.S. Senate has 16 women in its ranks. The female percentages are low, 16.6 percent in the House and 16 percent in the Senate, but still an improvement over the four female senators and 28 House members who were serving 15 years ago. Before 1978, no woman whose career was not linked to the death of a spouse ever served in the U.S. Senate, note political scientists Jennifer

Lawless and Richard Fox in their seminal 2005 book, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. An improvement, yes, they say, but when the last Congress convened, the United States ranked 57th worldwide, below the average, in the number of women serving in the national legislature. It lagged behind countries that included Spain, Vietnam, Bulgaria, and Turkmenistan.

Why have the numbers remained so comparatively meager? When women do choose to run for office, studies have shown that they are increasingly as successful as men. Cultural attitudes have evolved and women have become better at asking friends and family for money. But fundraising can still be a stumbling block, says Graff, who leads Lifetime's extensive network of women's advocacy projects. Bottom line, says Hunt, is that even today, "girls just aren't like all of these boys who get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and see the president of the United States." Lawless and Fox refer to that as the "gender gap in political ambition." The results of their studies are startling.

Though young men and women participate politically in roughly the same percentages—volunteering for campaigns, signing petitions, and voting, for example—the authors found that when asked if they could envision themselves running for office, women were 40 percent less likely than men to say yes. Smaller percentages of women say they think they'd win if they ran, and women routinely cite much lower level offices than men when asked what they would feel comfortable running for. That has led to what Lawless and Fox characterized as the stagnated climb of women, which, they say, has been exacerbated by the growing lack of a coherent women's movement.

"Part of this whole issue," says Hunt, "is women seeing themselves as supporting actors. You've got to break through that—that's why a woman in the White House is essential." It will take nothing short of an ambition revolution for the ranks of elected women to expand even modestly.

Michelle Goldberg, 32, counts herself among those who never saw Clinton's candidacy as a great advancement for women. "It always struck me as somewhat tragic that the prospect of the first female president would involve someone who was essentially running to take over for her husband," says Goldberg, an author and freelance journalist who has written critically about Clinton's campaign and feminism. "I never saw her candidacy as a great feminist boon, and I was shocked when I realized that so many women I really admire had invested so much of their hopes in her."

Goldberg, whose husband works for the Obama campaign, says her generation was introduced to Clinton when she was defending her husband from philandering charges. She saw the prospect of a Clinton presidency as akin to the administration of Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de

Kirchner, the wife of the former president. It suggested something halfway between the rise of developing-world women who came to power as extensions of husbands or fathers, like Pakistan's late Benazir Bhutto, and those who rose on their own merits, like Germany's Merkel. Goldberg says she is among those who found Clinton's charges of sexism during the campaign opportunistic, but allows that it spurred a public discussion about "how we talk about women in power and an inching improvement in public discourse." Yet she sees Clinton's candidacy marking the end of feminist politics that puts the triumph over sexism at the "dead center of all their political struggles," and her legacy as proof that there's political power to be had for someone who speaks to the "grievances and anxieties of women and their still-incomplete journey toward equality." But what does that say about the imperative to have a woman break through to the Oval Office? "I'm skeptical," Goldberg says, "about how much it really changes anything in and of itself—and that comes partly from spending time in a lot of countries that have had women leaders and very bad policies."

At the conservative Independent Women's Forum, Carrie Lukas gives Clinton more credit for making the White House seem a realistic goal for a woman. "One of the lessons from Hillary Clinton is that America is absolutely open to and ready for a woman president," says Lukas, 34, the forum's vice president for policy and economics. Though, Lukas says, citing Thatcher as a role model, it has never occurred to her that a woman wouldn't be thought of as a legitimate presidential candidate.

And Lukas touches squarely on why, when women look in the mirror, they may not see a political leader. It's the toll such a life can take on family, consistently the biggest factor cited by women asked to explain their lack of political ambition. Hunt and Wilson argue that when women see others like them balance family and leadership, the choice to enter the political fray will be easier. But opting out, says Lukas, should not be read as failure. "It's a self-selection issue, and I don't think women are crazy to be making what is a very rational decision when they choose not to be part of the political world," she says. Opting out of politics doesn't mean women aren't succeeding, she argues.

Pipeline. So, what has Clinton meant? Will her groundbreaking campaign translate to anything tangible? Or was she such a unique candidate that her footprint will wash away, and women will continue to search for that right path to the White House, if not to political parity?

"Clinton showed how to establish national security credentials, how to be seen as a legitimate commander in chief," says Michele Swers, 37, a government professor at Georgetown University. "But the biggest barrier remains the pipeline issue." Clinton's greatest legacy may be her persistence and resilience, which normalized the notion of women running for high office, says

Wilson. She was a woman who walked into a room and acted as if things were OK—"and that's the best damn way to walk into a room," Wilson says.

Graff, who describes Clinton as brilliant, ambitious, and genuine about caring for people, thinks her former boss will be more than a historical asterisk but says it's too early to tell whether her candidacy will prove a game changer. "Will women emerge more quickly because she's put a stake in the ground? Time will tell," she says. "Too much in society hasn't changed—and won't until men are raising the kids."

But at least these days, Graff's 8-year-old nephew isn't asking her why there hasn't been a girl *vice* president. His question is *the* question: Why hasn't there been a girl president? The answer, she says, is complicated.

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BS

The "woman power" movement has become its own worst enemy. If women would stop defining themselves in terms of gender, they would do better in elections. But as long as this crap is shovelled down our throats, we'll continue to resist swallowing. Part of Obama's success is due to his refusal to define himself as simply "black", and therefore entitled to something.

Women running for office would be well advised to avoid gender-based strategy (e.g. Clinton 08). If she had run as a person rather than as a "woman", she might have succeeded.

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