

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

Gendering Character Assassination

The United States has never had a woman president. It has come relatively close to electing a woman on two occasions when the Democratic Party nominated Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris in 2016 and 2024, respectively. Yet, both candidates lost to Donald Trump. The United Nations (2026) finds that, across the world, women are losing ground as political leaders. In 2026, the UN (2026) notes, women lead just 28 countries, while women have never led 101 countries. Data shows that countries with women in leadership roles are more stable and make better decisions to earn public trust. Yet, current trends reflect a growing backlash against women's equality stoked in part by populist and far-right leaders.

This backlash takes both open and subtle forms. At its most visible, it may involve online harassment, coordinated abuse on social media, threats, ridicule, or public campaigns designed to undermine women in positions of authority (on social media, see Jankowicz et al., 2021). More often, however, it operates indirectly through persistent stereotypes, double standards, and assumptions about what kinds of roles women should or should not occupy. Women leaders face heightened scrutiny of their appearance, family life, personality, emotions, or leadership behavior in ways that men often do not. Assertiveness may be interpreted as aggressiveness, confidence as arrogance, and ambition as excessive self-interest, reflecting persistent gender biases in the evaluation of women leaders and public figures (Heilman & Caleo, 2018).

Even in societies that broadly support equal opportunities for women, assumptions about femininity, leadership, caregiving, and family responsibilities continue to shape public perceptions. These assumptions become particularly visible when a prominent woman experiences a public failure or becomes involved in a scandal. The case of Elizabeth Holmes illustrates this dynamic. Holmes, the founder of Theranos, became one of Silicon Valley's most celebrated entrepreneurs in the early 2010s before her company collapsed and she was convicted of fraud in 2022. Holmes's downfall stemmed from serious allegations of fraud and deception, not from her gender. Yet, some commentary that followed her conviction suggested that Holmes's mistake lay in attempting to emulate the aggressive, hyper-competitive approach of celebrated male entrepreneurs like Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg. In some accounts, Holmes's redemption appeared to require not merely accepting responsibility for wrongdoing but also retreating from the image of the ambitious, independent business leader and returning to a more nurturing, family-centered identity associated with motherhood and domestic life (Keohane, 2023).

Such reactions reveal that backlash does not always take the form of direct hostility toward women. It can also appear as seemingly benevolent advice about how women ought to behave, what aspirations they should pursue, and which social roles are considered appropriate. The message may be subtle, but its implication is clear: public authority, assertive leadership, and personal ambition remain more culturally acceptable for some groups than for others.

This backlash may also manifest itself through character assassination, a “deliberate destruction of an individual’s reputation or credibility through character attacks” (Shiraeve et al., 2022, p. 10). Character attacks exist across societies in all times and places because they function effectively in contests over power. They operate through all communication media, including the analog like political speeches, and the digital like memes (Samoilenko et al., 2020). They can be complex, including drawn-out investigations and reporting, or simple labels and names. Gender and character assassination are deeply interwoven. Indeed, many character attacks include either an explicit or implicit argument that the target is behaving in ways that violate appropriate gender norms (Shiraeve et al., 2022, p. 224). As noted above, these gendered norms often involve behaviors like caretaking and raising children for women and working and leading for men. Experimental research shows that under expectancy violation theory, women are particularly vulnerable to stereotype-based attack. In other words, showing that a candidate has violated the expectations of their gender group can be a potent means of attack (Cassese & Holman, 2018).

For character assassins, even running for political office or leading a company may itself constitute inappropriate gendered behavior. Traditional narratives of women’s leadership suggest women are caught in a gendered double bind, wherein they are trapped between appearing likeable and feminine or competent and hence masculine enough to do the job (for one of the original formulations of this concept, see Jamieson, 1995). The media frequently painted Hillary Clinton into such double binds, as scholars have shown (see, e.g., Burns & Bowling, 2021; Harp et al., 2016; Neville-Shepard & Nolan, 2019; Zulli, 2019). Women political candidates are expected to be likeable, whereas male politicians like Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Bernie Sanders frequently get angry or upset with no impact on their reputations (McCall, 2020). Race-based expectations and stereotypes intersect with gender as well. Black women must also navigate stereotypes related to the hypersexualized Jezebel and the angry Black woman. Research on character assassination and Kamala Harris, for instance, shows the prevalence of character attacks related to her alleged anger and promiscuous past in newspaper coverage (Keohane et al., 2025; Nee, 2022). Social media is rife with such attacks as well (Jankowicz et al., 2021).

Any account of women in politics must also reckon with the power of the media to shape narratives around women’s leadership and potentially disadvantage female candidates. Here, the research is mixed. Studies tend to be country and candidate specific, which is understandable given the cultural nature of gendered expectations. One large meta-analysis of 90 quantitative content analyses across the world and across political race levels (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020) found that the media do cover male and female candidates differently in a way that might be detrimental to female candidates (p. 134). Men are more visible in proportional representation governments, and they tend to get more coverage that shows their campaigns to be viable, whereas women are more frequently covered in ways that emphasize their gender, their family, and their looks (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020, p. 132).

The impacts that Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) found in the meta-analysis are small. Indeed, as other studies have shown, overtly sexist media coverage telling voters

not to elect a woman is rare these days (at least in Western democracies), but instead subtle character attacks can undermine voter perceptions of female candidates' competence and plant the idea that there is something deviant about their ambition for political office (see Keohane, 2024; Teele et al., 2018).

Experimental research paints a similarly nuanced picture. A meta-analysis of 50 experimental studies involving more than 23,000 participants found that voters often respond similarly to media coverage of male and female candidates. The sample included a range of democracies: the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Australia, New Zealand, and several others. When gender-differentiated effects do occur, they are typically disadvantageous for women. Coverage emphasizing appearance, family roles, personality traits, or stereotypically gendered characteristics tends to reinforce traditional expectations and reduce perceptions of women's viability as political leaders (Rohrbach et al., 2023). Thus, while overt gender bias in political reporting may be less pervasive than earlier research suggested, subtle forms of gendered framing continue to shape how audiences evaluate women in politics.

Of course, gender is not just about women but operates in a relational fashion. Femininity is defined against masculinity, creating the appearance of a gendered binary. While most of the chapters in this issue explore the mediated character assassination of female politicians and leaders, lurking behind the attacks is the entanglement of cultural notions of both femininity and masculinity. As Shiraev et al. (2022) have shown, being smeared as a wimp or softie, as U.S. politicians George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis were, can undermine a campaign. These gendered attacks may also carry the hint of queerness, illustrating the link between attacks based on gender and those based on sexuality. Scholars have also investigated gendered character attacks on men in historical cases. Drawing on examples from antiquity, for instance, shows how sexuality, appearance, family roles, emotional stability, and perceived violations of these gender norms featured in character attacks (Meister, 2026; Icks, 2020). Historical analyses, including studies of figures such as the Roman emperor Elagabalus, foreground how many ancient attacks focused on alleged violations of masculinity and its entailments: sexual norms, dress, and bodily presentation (Icks, 2011). Thus, Elagabalus is a historical case that connects to contemporary discussions of gendered reputational attacks. Much more research of this kind is needed, particularly in contemporary political, media, and digital environments.

As is hopefully clear, this area of research is relevant and necessary, especially amidst the contextual factors identified at the outset of this introduction. This special issue brings together scholars studying the media, character assassination, and gender. The authors largely focus on cases of female politicians in our current moment, but gendered character assassination exists across social realms from entertainment to business to science and across cultural and historic contexts, too. These essays represent an initial attempt to theorize and analyze gendered character assassination in different mediated contexts.

To that end, this special issue is organized across media types. The first three essays explore gendered character assassination across myth, adaptation, and translation,

introducing a transmedia perspective on character assassination. Oleg Kashirskikh and Katerina Tsetsura's essay on Russian media coverage of Kamala Harris introduces Harris as a Western female political figure in an authoritarian political context. Their analysis of texts that span news, political commentary, and infotainment shows how Harris as a figure is depoliticized and translated into familiar cultural gendered stereotypes. Leslie Reynard's essay explores the figure of Lilith as one of the earliest victims of character assassination. The destruction of women's reputations, she shows, can masquerade as a form of moral instruction. Not only that, the various media of the ancient world, from oral storytelling to scripture, function as tools for the erasure of figures like Lilith. Counter-reading by feminist scholars can help correct centuries of oppression, she argues. Florian Krüpe's essay on empress Messalina shows that sex sells across millennia. He traces the influence of unreliable narrators who projected fears about female power and sexual desire onto the figure of Messalina, a projection that is going strong in comics, film adaptations, and novels. Taken together, these three essays show how character assassination and gender span different media environments as attacks are translated and appropriated.

The next two essays, by Tyler Johnson and Clara-Sophia Höhn, look specifically at the news media. Tyler Johnson's essay uses experimental research to explore gendered interpretations of leadership in newspaper coverage based on Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar's presidential run in 2020. Shortly after her announcement that she would seek the nomination, news coverage suggesting she was a horrible boss emerged. Johnson exposed participants to several experimental conditions in which a politician announced a presidential run amidst scandals about potential abuses in their office. Manipulating the politician's gender showed that these scandals likely did have a negative impact on the politicians' credibility, but news stories that exposed participants to the idea that leadership is viewed through gendered lenses may ameliorate some of the impacts on female politicians. Höhn's essay explores how Southern newspapers in the United States used gendered tropes to attack White women who were active in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Their activism in support of racial equality challenged the social norms of the South, which sought to protect White women from the alleged danger of Black men. Thus, instead of calling attention to the fact that a group of White women disrupted these norms with direct and explicit attacks, newspapers instead mobilized gendered norms, allowing readers to use their own cultural knowledge to fill in the gaps of the attacks.

The final two essays explore social media and gendered attacks. Apurvabhai et al.'s essay on TikTok shows the potential of user-based refutation of misogynist comments on the platform. Using TikTok's Stitch feature together with hired actors to refute misinformation and misogynistic content, their experiment showed that refutations were able to reduce viewers' beliefs in misinformation, but not misogyny. This illustrates the difficulty of working against misogynistic beliefs online. Kevin Stein and Matthew Barton use William Benoit's theory of persuasive attack to explore meme attacks on Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Kamala Harris. They find that memes are a powerful way to launch a character attack given that they amplify negative traits and collapse complexity. Sexist tropes were common, including suggestions that Clinton and Harris owed their

success to inappropriate sexual relationships with men. Memes, they conclude, are not just online jokes, but rhetorical texts that have import for political campaigning and gendered character assassination.

Ultimately, these essays show the significance of exploring gender alongside character assassination across the affordances of a variety of media. They raise more questions for scholars to consider. How can women and other targets protect their reputations against gendered character assassination? Are there attacks that span cultures and time periods? How has the changing media landscape facilitated gendered character assassination? These questions, and many others, can guide investigations of this important phenomenon.

Although this volume provides some preliminary answers, much remains to be explored. Future research should attend to the strategies that targets use to resist, counter, and recover from reputational attacks. Comparative studies could help identify which patterns are historically and culturally specific and which appear to be more universal. Equally important is the need to move beyond a primary focus on women and examine gendered attacks directed at men, transgender individuals, and others whose experiences remain comparatively understudied. Such work would deepen our understanding not only of gender and reputation but also of the broader social, rhetorical, and psychological mechanisms that shape public judgment.

As the cases in this volume demonstrate, gendered character assassination is neither a relic of the past nor a phenomenon confined to any single culture, ideology, or medium. It remains a persistent feature of public life. Understanding how such attacks emerge, spread, and influence audiences is therefore essential for understanding continuing struggles over power, identity, legitimacy, and representation in contemporary societies.

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Editors of the special issue

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