

WE HAVE HER BACK

August 6, 2020

To:

News Division Heads, Editors in Chiefs, Bureau Chiefs, Political Directors, Editors, Producers, Reporters, and Anchors

From:

Fatima Goss Graves (National Women's Law Center), Ilyse Hogue (NARAL) Valerie Jarrett, Alexis McGill Johnson and Melanie Newman (Planned Parenthood), Debra Ness (National Partnership for Women and Families), Cecile Richards (Supermajority), Jess Morales Rocketto, Hilary Rosen, Stephanie Shriock and Christina Reynolds (Emily's List), Tina Tchen (TimesUp)

Re: NEWS COVERAGE FOR THE VICE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

We are reaching out now because we are about to embark on a historic moment - once again - having a woman on a Presidential Campaign ticket. While you have already done significant reporting on the process, we know you are actively preparing for coverage about the specific Democratic Vice Presidential nominee.

Given how few women have reached this point, the sometimes disappointing coverage of the process to date and the double standards we've seen in the public and media expectations of women leaders over the years- and even more so for Black and Brown women leaders - we wanted to respectfully share some thoughts with you about the media's role in the scrutiny and coverage of women and women of color candidates in general, and the vice-presidential candidate in particular.

We do this today without knowing who Joe Biden's choice will be, as it allows you to consider your coverage in the context of these important societal issues without the additional considerations that a specific candidate's personal story may bring.

Our country - and your newsrooms - have learned a lot since the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests for racial equality that his death spurred. For the first time in too many years, there was a national conversation about what real systemic racism means and how it insidiously creeps into stereotypes and tropes that are common in our everyday lives. We know from public reporting that many of your newsrooms had internal conversations about your coverage, your diversity and your editorial judgments. Good and thoughtful questions were raised, often by your own journalists, about how you could produce news coverage that took systemic bias out of the equation. And each of you took action. While there's still work to do, that action included being more careful about the choice of narratives for stories, including more Black people and people of color on the front lines of reporting and behind the scenes producing and editing. In short, the times and the experience made you, the most powerful people in media, stop and think about your role in perpetuating inequality and the opportunity you had to promote equality and simple justice with your reporting of the news.

We are calling on you to do this same with this next historic moment. A woman VP candidate, and possibly a Black or Brown woman candidate, requires the same kind of internal consideration about systemic inequality as you undertook earlier this year. Anything less than full engagement in this thoughtful oversight would be a huge step backwards for the progress you have pledged to make to expand diversity of thought and opportunity in your newsrooms and in your coverage.

Women have been subject to stereotypes and tropes about qualifications, leadership, looks, relationships and experience. Those stereotypes are often amplified and weaponized for Black and Brown women. Attempts at legitimate investigations of a candidate have repeatedly turned into misguided stories that perpetuate impressions of women as inadequate leaders, and Black and Brown women as worse. There are multiple ways that media coverage over the years has contributed to the facts of the lack of diversity at the top of society's roles. For example:

- Reporting on a woman's ambition as though the very nature of seeking political office, or any higher job for that matter is not a mission of ambition
- Relationships with partners, staff, colleagues and donors are characterized differently if the woman is not seen as subservient or supportive
- Reporting on whether a woman is liked (a subjective metric at best) as though it is news when the "likeability" of men is never considered a legitimate news story.
- Reporting, even as asides in a story, on a woman's looks, weight, tone of voice, attractiveness and hair is sexist news coverage unless the same analysis is applied to every candidate
- Reporting on questions of electability of women is, in itself, a perpetuation of a stereotype about the ability of women to lead
- Reporting on doubts women may not be qualified leaders even when they have experience equal to or exceeding male leaders
- Reporting on the heritage of Black women or women of color perpetuates a misunderstanding about who is legitimately American
- Reporting on and using pictures of a woman's, particularly black women, show of anger at injustice or any other kind of passion in communication perpetuates racist tropes that suggest unfairly that women are too emotional or irrational in their leadership or worse "hate America"

We are certain that if you pursue thoughtful conversation internally, you will find even more examples of how these stereotypes can seep into coverage, and thereby seep into the public consciousness as voters are seeking to understand those seeking office. We believe it is your job to, not just pay attention to these stereotypes, but to actively work to be anti-racist and anti-sexist in your coverage (ie: equal) as this political season progresses and this Presidential ticket is introduced. As much as you have the public's trust, you also have great power. We urge you to use it wisely.

We are here to help you with this challenge. We would be happy to meet and continue to engage on these issues. This is a defining election no matter your viewpoint. We intend to collectively and individually monitor coverage and we will call out those we believe take our country backwards with sexist and/or racist coverage.

As we enter another historic moment, we will be watching you. We expect change. We expect a new way of thinking about your role in how she is treated and the equality she deserves relative to the three men running for President and Vice President. Your great institutions, the ideals you serve, and our country, deserve no less.

Thank you.