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There's Still Discrimination

The opportunity for bright, energetic women to participate in politics has never been better than this year. But sexual discrimination in the arena does exist, regardless of a woman's skills.

In this article, the second of a series, political consultant Jeff Greenfield warns of the pitfalls along the campaign trail and how to avoid them.

By JEFF GREENFIELD

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When I worked for Mayor John Lindsay, New York's city hall was swarming with mayoral assistants — young, bright, brash, aggressive, glib.

One of those assistants was a quiet, unassertive woman who was clearly outside the battle for the mayor's ear. I don't know what happened to most of those bright young aides, but I do know what happened to that quiet young woman. She works in the Congress now. Her name's Elizabeth Holtzman.

Perhaps because of her city hall scars, Rep. Holtzman has a professional staff more heavily female than most in congress. Legislative assistant Aviva Futurian says, "Having a woman employer is incredibly different from the usual experience on Capitol Hill. Liz has fantastic respect, even among the

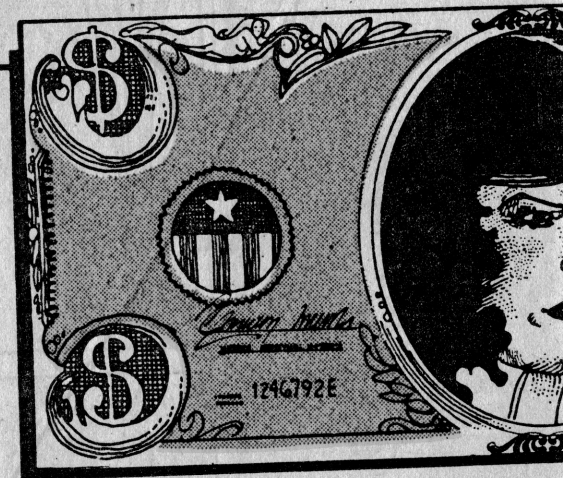
young, smart lawyers from the Senate who think of themselves as the 'real' senators. When I tell them who I work for, there's a lot less condescension. And of course, with Liz, there's no question of my getting less responsibility because I'm a woman."

Working for a woman is one way to cut through the barriers of discrimination in politics. It also helps to have "traditional" credentials. Jane Frank, chief counsel to Sen. John Tunney's Committee on Constitutional Rights, joined Tunney's staff as a Harvard Law School graduate with three years of private practice' and says there were "no hassles at all. Oh, I guess I was

mistaken for a secretary once or twice, but that was really all."

Those women without female candidates or Harvard Law degrees have it a lot rougher in the competitive, often male-dominated, battlefield ambience of political campaigns. They have always been welcome, of course as — volunteers, as low-salaried, low-visibility workers who put the schedules and meetings together while their male bosses are out lunching with the members of the press. But when they seek something closer to equity, they are met with a series of barriers: Some of them ludicrous, some deadly serious.

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Discrimination

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"Both political parties discriminate more than government — far more," says Rep. Margaret Heckler from Massachusetts. "As a volunteer campaign worker, I remember a whole team of women taking all the abuse that one receives, such as at a railway station with commuters, only to find the candidate at home with his feet up, sipping a cocktail."

One woman (whose name will be changed to Susan, to protect the guilty) remembers being in a high-level campaign meeting at which her presence was necessary but clearly unwelcome.

"The press secretary sent out for Cokes," Susan says. "It was a very hot and muggy night. There were six of us in the room, and he came back in with five Cokes. I will never forget that small, petty way of telling me I didn't really belong."

There are similar slights aimed at women. Campaigns are always high-voltage affairs and people lose their tempers with clockwork regularity.

When a woman blows up, it is taken as proof of "feminine instability" or, it is said knowingly, "it's her time of the month." Women are constantly "offered" jobs with less status than men with the explanation that, while of course they will have the responsibility, it wouldn't do to give them the title because of sensitivity.

But by far the most common form of anti-female discrimination is the most basic — money. It crosses party and political lines completely; some of the most "liberal" politicians are the worst proponents of inequality.

Angela Cohen, who went to work for a militantly liberal congressman more than a decade ago, says, "The first fight I had to make was over money."

"When I asked for the same salary as the man he'd fired, the congressman said, 'Why do you want so much? You're single.' I heard other women being asked, 'Why do you need so much? Your husband works.' Many offices in congress had women being paid as secretaries who were doing exactly the same work as men but who could just not get paid the same as a man."

When Carol Welch quit her secure government job to join Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, she was promised \$300 a week. When she drew her first pay check, she found she was making \$100 a week, because "Women in this campaign are being paid \$100 a week."

Welch won her fight by demanding that she be paid what she'd been promised. And this is the simple but necessary tactic that has to be kept in mind.

Once a campaign makes a commitment, they can't be allowed to skip it on the ground that "Women don't need as much as men."

There are lots of times when campaigns don't pay anybody; when the staff finds it has "volunteered" its paychecks away in the last weeks of frenetic fund-raising. That's part of the risk any worker takes. But the days of the double-standard — at least as far as salaries are concerned — are over.

Most candidates simply cannot stand the publicity that would erupt if the press found out their campaigns were giving one level of pay to men and another to women. And most political reporters are smart enough to tell the difference between a disgruntled campaign worker and a legitimate case of sex discrimination.

"Salary," says veteran New York political worker Carol Opton, "is the key. There may be times when you'll have to make coffee, and you can grit your teeth once or twice on that fight. But you must stick to your guns on salary."

The same is true of the other unfair practices in politics. Talking about her early days in politics, Rep. Millicent Fenwick from New Jersey says, "Women are on the outside when the door to the smoke-filled room is closed." But when a woman has spent four days gathering information for a political briefing, there's nothing right about her being excluded from the briefing session with a candidate. Here, too, firmness is important.

One researcher I once worked with, "Betsy Forester," got herself reluctantly included by knowing more than anybody else.

"It was important that the candidate be constantly briefed about the issues. Well, they couldn't exclude me from the 'big' meetings because I was in charge of the research files — nobody else knew what was in them. They had to have me there, even though they didn't want me."

In this respect, the women's movement has helped make political participation by women more "acceptable" by making many of the traits of successful campaign operatives — aggressiveness, firmness, insistence on fairness — less "irresponsible" than it once seemed. When a political operative who's proven her worth demands the salary, the title and the access that goes with that worth, it is a lot less easy to dismiss her demands than it once was.

Nonetheless, the biggest obstacle to sexual equality in politics is still the handiest tool of prejudice: The sexual innuendo.

NEXT: "Political Pillow Talk"

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