

Feminists split on HRC sexism defense

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After jeers from her Democratic rivals and many commentators, [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) has backed off her suggestion last week that her opponents were ganging up on her because she is a woman.

But the debate is still churning in feminist circles, where some women's activists said she had every right to invoke sexism and gender stereotypes as a defense on the campaign trail — and predicted that this tactic will prove effective against fellow Democrats and against a Republican, if she is the general election nominee.

“It goes beyond logic — it’s a gut response,” Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, said of the spectacle of Clinton onstage confronting seven male rivals and two male moderators at a debate in Philadelphia on Wednesday night.

Smeal, who has endorsed Clinton, compared the debate scene to the congressional grilling of Anita Hill when she challenged Clarence Thomas’ Supreme Court nomination in 1991.

“Every woman — it was just so visceral — that panel was all male,” Smeal recalled. “It didn’t matter almost what was being said. It [was] a visceral gut reaction, and I think that’s what you’re seeing here again.”

Clinton’s campaign this week accused rivals of engaging in “the politics of piling on” after they roundly criticized her evasive and confusing answers at the Philadelphia event about whether illegal immigrants should be eligible for driver’s licenses.

The next day, Clinton called the political world a “boys’ club,” and a union chief endorsed her with the observation that the debate had been “six guys against Hillary.”

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“They are being very, very strategic” by playing to sympathies that virtually every woman in a male-dominated professional world can relate to, feminist writer Naomi Wolf said of the Clinton campaign. At the same time, she said, “They are yielding to gender stereotypes.”

One prominent feminist who was critical of Clinton, former NARAL Pro-Choice America President Kate Michelman, has endorsed [John Edwards](#). In tandem, Smeal’s comments suggested that the reaction of female activists may be driven more by their candidate preferences than their feminist

sensibility.

“Any serious candidate for president should make their views clear and let the American people know where they stand on issues,” Michelman said in a statement released by the

Edwards campaign.

“And any serious candidate for president should be held to the same standard — whether man or woman. Have we have come a long way? Well, far enough to know better than to use our gender as a shield when the questions get too hot.”

Other campaigns similarly rolled eyes at Clinton’s comments, which they said amounted to her playing the victim to fend off legitimate criticism.

“I hope that Sen. Clinton wants to be treated like everybody else,” [Sen. Barack Obama](#) (D-Ill.) said on NBC’s “Today” show early Friday. I didn’t come out and say, ‘Look, I’m being hit on because I look different.’”

In Concord, N.H., Friday, Clinton distanced herself from her campaign’s apparent tactic.

“I don’t think they’re piling on because I’m a woman,” she said. “I think they’re piling on because I’m winning.”

But even as Clinton abandoned the stance — arguably after it had run its public course and she had reaped the benefits — some women who have spent their lives fighting the politics of gender stereotyping said Clinton had a right to turn the latest events to her advantage.

They note that she has spent a career enduring public attacks, often accompanied by gender-based slurs about her persona.

“Turnabout is fair play,” said Marie Wilson, a Clinton supporter and president of the White House Project, which trains women to enter politics. “When you’re the one and only, those stereotypes are coming at you all the time. If she has one time when she can make them work for her, why not?”

This week’s sparring over whether Clinton is using her gender as a shield from the normal push and shove of politics is unlikely to be the last voters hear on the subject.

Even more than Clinton’s Democratic rivals, Republicans in the general election will confront the question of proper political etiquette for male-on-female attacks if she is the nominee.

Wolf, a Democrat who advised Al Gore in the 2000 race on how to present a more “alpha male” image, said if this comes to pass, she has little sympathy for the GOP dilemma.

Men traditionally speak in more combative tones and language, in ways that women tend to find off-putting, Wolf said. Her complaints this week were a way of pushing back against that brand of public discourse, Wolf argued. “I have to say they are doing it legitimately,” she added.

Smeal said that she and other women deeply involved in politics didn’t immediately see the debate in terms of gender, but rather in the political terms of rivals engaging a front-runner.

Then, she said, her group started getting e-mails from women complaining that Clinton was being attacked. "Our rank and file ... saw it the other way," she said.

She and some other women's activists were unapologetic about Clinton's willingness to use stereotypes to her advantage.

"You reap what you sow," she said. "There's been discrimination against women for so long, and for once this is benefiting a woman."

It is not the first time for Clinton. The turning point of her 2000 race for New York senator came when her challenger, then-Rep. Rick Lazio (R), marched into her personal space during a debate to present her with a campaign financing pledge, a move many women saw as threatening. In her 2006 reelection, and this year, her advisers have missed no opportunity to label male challengers as "angry."

Without a doubt, Clinton at times has been the target of public misogyny. She's the only presidential candidate, for instance, whose likeness is being sold on the Internet in the form of a nutcracker. But some prominent women can't stomach Clinton's willingness to turn the same traditional stereotypes to her advantage.

The Edwards campaign released a statement from Michelman, accusing Clinton of "trying to have it both ways."

"At one minute, the strong woman ready to lead, the next, she's the woman under attack, disingenuously playing the victim card," Michelman said. "It is not presidential."

An aide to Edwards, who most relentlessly pressed the attack against Clinton on Wednesday night, said the Edwards campaign is keenly aware that any criticism of Clinton risks alienating women, who represent the large majority of voters in Democratic primaries and who have been Clinton's most loyal supporters.

"Did we take some risk [in challenging her at the debate]? Yeah," said Edwards' chief strategist, Joe Trippi. "But we believe that it is important to show the real difference between us and Hillary Clinton."