Celebrating Successes and Ignoring Systemic Barriers: How Magazines Falsely Identify the Progress of Women’s Status in American Politics

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Abstract: In this essay, Weems-West critically considers the ways in which the progress of women’s statuses in American politics has been falsely represented through magazines.

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Over the past few decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of women holding political positions in the United States. However, despite this progress, some magazines have falsely identified the advancement of women’s status in American politics. This project explores how the progress of women’s status in American politics is falsely identified in magazines. To do this, I will define the theoretical concepts of progress and false identification followed by a brief analysis. Lastly, I will answer the questions of who the audience for these images is and who is succumbing to sensationalized media coverage, identifying where I see the main conflict.
Progress can be defined as the development and improvement of society towards a better state. In terms of women’s status in American politics, progress can be seen as the increase in the number of women holding political positions, as well as the advancement of policies that support gender equality. False identification, on the other hand, refers to the misidentification or misrepresentation of something. In the context of this project, false identification refers to the misrepresentation of the progress of women’s status in American politics in magazines. Magazines are often guilty of falsely identifying the progress of women’s status in American politics by sensationalizing stories that highlight women’s achievements in politics without providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges they face. These stories often portray women as having broken through the glass ceiling and made it to the top of their field, without acknowledging the deep-seated inequalities that hinder women’s success.

For example, magazines often highlight the fact that there are now more women in Congress than ever before. While this is certainly a positive development, it does not tell the full story. Women still only make up around a quarter of Congress, and women of color are significantly underrepresented. Additionally, women still face harassment and discrimination in the workplace, which can make it difficult for them to advance in their careers. Michele Swers in her book titled *The Difference Women Make: The Policy Impact of Women in Congress*, argues that progress towards gender equality in American politics is not just a matter of increasing the number of women in elected office, but also the substantive impact that women have on policy making. Furthermore, magazines often portray individual women as role models and trailblazers without acknowledging the larger societal structures that allow women to succeed. For example, a magazine might feature an article about a woman who has become the CEO of a major corporation. While this is certainly an achievement, it is important to acknowledge that this woman likely had access to resources and opportunities that many other women do not have, such as a supportive family, a good education, and connections in the business world.

The audience for magazines that falsely identify the progress of women’s status in American politics is likely to be diverse but may include people who are not well-versed in politics or who are looking for inspirational stories about women succeeding in traditionally male-dominated fields. This audience may be falling for clickbait headlines and stories that promise a feel-good story about a woman who has overcome obstacles to achieve success. However, these stories often overlook the larger structural barriers that impede women’s progress and can ultimately be harmful by perpetuating the myth that individual success stories are proof of progress. Jane Mansbridge in her *American Political Science Review* article called “Rethinking Representation,” argues that traditional understandings of representation in politics have focused too narrowly on descriptive representation, the numerical presence of women in politics, but have overlooked the importance of substantive representation, the ways in which women’s experiences and perspectives shape policymaking. Magazines focus too narrowly on the successes of individual women, ignoring the institutional obstacles to gender equality.

As I see it, there is conflict between the progress that has been made in terms of women’s status in American politics and the ongoing challenges that women face in breaking through systemic barriers. While it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of women who have succeeded in politics, it is equally important to acknowledge the larger societal structures that continue to hold women back. One example of a magazine publishing a sensationalized story
about an individual woman’s success while ignoring systemic challenges to women’s advancement is the coverage of Kamala Harris’ election as Vice President in 2020. While Harris’ historic achievement as the first woman and first person of color to hold the office of Vice President was widely celebrated in the media, some publications focused on sensationalized aspects of her personal life rather than the broader context of gender inequality and political representation. A January 2021 article in Cosmopolitan magazine titled “The Real Kamala Harris” focused on Harris’ fashion choices, personal relationships, and lifestyle, while only briefly mentioning her political achievements and the systemic barriers she faced as a woman of color in politics. This type of coverage can perpetuate the idea that individual women’s success is solely a result of their personal qualities rather than the larger social and political structures that shape opportunities for women in American society. By falsely identifying the progress of women’s status in American politics, magazines can perpetuate harmful myths about gender equality and undermine efforts to address the systemic issues that continue to impact women’s lives. Rebecca Rosen wrote an article titled “The Hidden Radicalism of Helen Keller” which examines the activism of Helen Keller through a radical lens. Rosen’s work finds that magazines often overlook the radical roots of feminist activism and instead focus on individual women’s successes as though they exist in a vacuum.

In summary, magazines have falsely identified the progress of women’s status in American politics by sensationalizing stories about individual women’s successes and ignoring the systematic challenges to women’s advancement. By doing so, they misrepresent the reality of gender inequality in politics and perpetuate harmful myths that hinder meaningful progress towards gender equality.

Figure 2: Detail of collage. Created by Payton Weems-West.
It is important for magazines to provide a more nuanced understanding of the progress of women’s status in American politics by acknowledging both the successes and the ongoing challenges that women face. This will help to raise awareness of the systemic issues that continue to hold women back and provide a more accurate picture of the state of gender equality in American politics. Ultimately, this will help to facilitate more effective efforts towards achieving true gender equality in American politics.

References


