

Sexist slant in media representation of women 'needs to change'

Catherine Wylie – Friday 30 December 2016

Laura Bates, the founder of Everyday Sexism, says previous male leaders have not been treated in the same way as Theresa May, Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel

Big improvements could be made in the way women are represented by the media following "massive focus" on the looks of famous figures including Theresa May, Hillary Clinton and Meghan Markle in 2016, according to the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project.

Laura Bates said previous male leaders have not been treated in the way Mrs May has, and that coverage of the female Prime Minister has had a "sexist slant".

The author added Mrs Clinton faced criticisms during the US election campaign that would probably not be made of men - such as references to the "Clinton cackle" or post-debate commentary on whether she was "smiling too much or hadn't smiled enough".

A "really important moment" was the strongly-worded statement put out by Prince Harry's communications secretary attacking the media over the "wave of abuse and harassment" his girlfriend Markle had experienced, Ms Bates said.

"As a whole I would definitely see a sexist slant of coverage of Theresa May ever since she became Prime Minister. But also, this is very much something

that's impacting on all female politicians and I think we have to think about what the knock-on impact of it is, because we are living in a country where fewer than a third of elected MPs are female, where there are more male MPs now currently serving than there have ever been female MPs.

"And when people going into that voting booth to make a decision about who's representing them it matters if the information that they've been provided by the press about female politicians is about their shoes and their hairstyles and their handbags, and the information that they've heard about male MPs in the news is about their policies and voting records."

Looking back on coverage of Mrs Clinton, she said: "We saw an unwarranted focus on her clothes, on her make-up, on her hairstyle. But we also, with Hillary Clinton I think in particular, saw certain criticisms being made of her that wouldn't necessarily been made of a male opponent."

Ms Bates said the coverage of Harry's relationship with Suits actress Markle featured "dog whistle misogyny and racism", adding: "I think the fact that Prince Harry decided to make the unprecedented decision to call that out for what it was was a major positive actually in terms of somebody in a position of enormous privilege pointing out the inequality being faced in press coverage by somebody in a position that he would never be in. I think that was actually a really important moment."

In relation to the coverage of Markle, Ms Bates said she believes there were "really quite deliberate attempts to paint her in a particular light, which we absolutely have not seen with Prince Harry's white blonde-haired previous girlfriends".

Speaking more generally about the representation of women in the media, she said: "I certainly don't think that we're seeing massive strides of improvement I have to say. And I also think it's really important to see this in a broader context

of other particular problems in the press coverage of women in particular. For example, the coverage of sexual violence in a way that is often dismissive or titillating."

Ms Bates, author of *Girl Up*, added: "I think there's a very long way to go. I think that there is a huge amount that can be improved on."