

New Jersey Women Lawyers Association
Nilaja Ford – Essay Submission

As a country, there has been ongoing discussion and debate as to the issues of character, temperament and appearance (outward physical appearance, as well as whether one shows his/her emotions or “wears a poker face”) as important considerations for our leaders. Discuss whether women, as attorneys and as aspiring leaders, are held to a different standard than men in being considered for leadership positions and/or promotions, and if so, (1) how has this impacted you in your chosen path to date, and (2) how you would propose to level the playing field – or not – and if not, why not.

“Such a nasty woman.” Those were the words spewed by President Donald Trump, in reference to his opponent, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, during the final 2016 presidential debate. Feminists everywhere cringed. Whether you were for her or against her, as a woman, in that moment, you had to feel something as she went for the highest leadership position in the country. I know I did. It reminded me of all the times in my personal, academic and professional life that I had to be strong but was rebuffed for my strength. It reminded me of the times when I had to be stern and was called a word that rhymes with witch. It also reminded me of the times when my warnings were not taken seriously by subordinate staff because of my gender and age. Women are traditionally conditioned to be delicate, diplomatic, quiet and mild in nature. Women are told to “know their place,” “mind their manners” and “act like a lady.” Whenever a woman must “man up” she is often criticized for it, even when being considered for promotions or leadership positions.

There is indeed a double standard. There is an unequal and unrealistic expectation for the behavior and demeanor of women. The election made it obvious. I cringe at the amount of strength it must have taken Hillary restrain her emotion after being called “nasty” by her peer on live TV. If she would have stooped to his level and hurled an insult back, she would have been considered unstable and emotional. The double standard is apparent. A reasonable person when under attack should be able to defend themselves with brute force. However, she had to be calm; she had to be poised; she had to keep going. Anything else would have been considered weak.

This past election displayed how many societal gender roles are still present. It showed the entire world that there are still large barriers for women that impede our ability to move forward. For example, I noticed the amount of time spent on what Hillary wore to debates. If Hillary wore the wrong suit or the wrong shoes, it made the news. It was clear (even down to

the formation of “pantsuit nation”) that appearance still plays a major role in the rhetoric surrounding women. If you are “too pretty” it is a problem. If you are “not pretty enough” or not someone’s fantasy of a dream girl it is also a problem. Unfortunately, this is true for most professional women. We have to be conscious of our physical appearance in order to be taken more seriously in many professional settings, including the courtroom. No short skirts, no low cleavage, no bare legs, no unkempt hair and no bright colors. Clearly, men do not have to overcome the same obstacles.

Women have long been held to a different standard than men in being considered for leadership roles and promotional opportunities. Women have also had to face adversity on many different fronts related to the standards of our patriarchal society. Throughout history and contemporaneously, women have been considered property of their husbands and/or fathers, and have been subjugated as such. However, we have also seen in history that there is rarely a subjugated group that will not eventually fight for the equalities and freedoms of the “majority.” Through the hard work of the early feminists, there were battles for rights like voting and access to the court system. Then there were battles to achieve and maintain robust professional careers and independent livelihoods. Currently, we are still fighting to maintain the right to personal autonomy, spanning from abortion to protections against sexual violence and rape culture. We still have a long way to go. The playing field is still uneven and the glass ceiling is still intact.

I consider my personal life as an example of this double standard. As a Human Resources professional, with over 10 years of experience, I considered pursuing a law degree with a focus in labor and employment law as a natural progression in furthering my professional career. Despite my experience and maturity, many people in my life greeted my decision with one word, “Why?” I am a single woman and a mother, in a successful co-parenting relationship with my son’s father. I want to move forward with my career goals and have the means to do so now that my son is older. What could be the problem? I quickly realized it was because I am a woman. To some people, my sacrifice to go back to school was selfish. However, I attend law school with many men who have children and I am certain they were simply congratulated for taking the steps to become a better provider.

As a leader and a mentor, I hope to be like my mother, my first mentor. She raised me to be strong. My father died suddenly of a brain aneurysm when I was twelve years old. My mother was enrolled at Rutgers, School of Social Work pursuing a Master’s degree and working

full time at a pharmaceutical company. Though this tragedy occurred in the middle of her program, I witnessed her not only finish her degree, but also maintain our home, while taking care of both me and my brother (inclusive of keeping me in my private school). Her caring nature, strength and resilience had a tremendous impact on me. Those characteristics have always been motivation to balance my ambitious professional career and equally ambitious familial responsibilities. I was raised with a foundation built on hard work and strong faith because with that, we were taught, all things are possible, regardless of gender. I plan to work extremely hard to provide my son and future female attorneys with that same foundation.

When I struggle as a mother, in the workplace or in law school, I use what I have learned from the strong and important women in my life. As an aspiring attorney, I will continue to be a mentor and provider of professional development to the next generation of women pursuing law and other leadership positions. I would like to see my efforts formalized in leadership academies for women in all capacities, but especially for those in underrepresented fields like law. I imagine a support network that includes courses where women can learn very important tangible professional skills and equally important intangible interpersonal skills from other women in similar industries. All women should have a safe place where they are encouraged to develop and use their voice, while learning the value of their thoughts and opinions. Additionally, I would hope for an environment where we can truly value each other as women, and stand united in the demand for respect and equality. I feel teaching these skills early on in elementary and middle schools would help immensely with shaping future generations, but leadership academies are also an amazing way to support women currently striving for excellence in leadership roles.

Regardless of gender, leadership qualities, strong work ethic and self-awareness should be taught to aspiring professionals through professional development. I hope to serve as an example for young women and I hope to have the ability provide leadership opportunities through my own professional successes. As women, we should encourage each other to achieve our personal bests and reject the tendency to diminish ourselves due to imaginary limitations. Amazing things happen when women support women.