

## Double standard of women in politics drives discussion

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By JENNIFER SPRAGUE

CHESTER - Just 11 days before the November 2008 presidential election, a group of women gathered at the Chester Historical Society for a discussion about women in politics.

Durham First Selectwoman Laura Francis, Portland's First Selectwoman Susan Bransfield and Connecticut's first female comptroller, Nancy Wyman, served as panelists for Friday's event, sponsored by the Middlesex County Community Foundation. The three panelists answered questions about their careers and discussed women in politics at the local, state and national levels.

Using U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton as an example, Francis said women are held to a different standard.

"I think she was frightened to show her soft side," Francis said. "But if men show their soft side, it's a plus."

When Clinton did show emotion, the media called it "fake," Wyman added.

"Women are not treated the same," Wyman said. "If you're a man, you're aggressive. If you're a woman, you know what you're called and it rhymes with 'itch.' No one comments on what the men wear. No one comments if their shoes are polished."

The media, Bransfield said, is "going after what they think people will listen to."

"They're going after the way women look because they think it matters, but if you have the right response and get back to the issues, you might be able to combat that," Bransfield said. "You can't be afraid. You have to be relaxed and show them that you're brave and you're a leader and you're going to get the job done better than anyone else."

Wyman said, "We have to do more to say 'Don't look at my legs. Look at my eyes.'"

Ellie Etter, from the audience, said that women need to speak up against misogyny, the contempt of women.

"It's the last thing you can be bigoted about and say it openly and proudly," she said.

Anne Yurasek, of Chester, said she thinks Sen. John McCain chose Sarah Palin as his running mate to get votes from Clinton supporters.

"He picked her because she's a women governor," Yurasek said. "I think there was tremendous backlash to that strategy. Are we judging her more because she's a woman? Absolutely. Unfortunately, we're not cutting her any slack."

Several women in the audience said if McCain wanted to choose a female Republican governor as his running mate, Connecticut Gov. M. Jodi Rell would have been a better choice.

Anita Ford Saunders, vice president of the board for the Middlesex County Community Foundation, served as moderator for the event and asked the panelists, "As a woman, how can we support other women in politics?"

"When you get your chance at the table, bring another chair for another woman," said Wyman, who achieved her first elected office, on

the school board, with the help of five other women.

Connecticut has historically had a female secretary of the state and a male comptroller, a standard she shattered when she was elected the state's first female comptroller.

Although Wyman said she has seen more women seek elected into office, there are "not as many women as we'd like to see in the state Senate and the state House."

Although much of the conversation Friday night dealt with state and national issues, Francis said that on a more local level, women are capable of more bipartisan efforts.

"It's easier I think for women to cross party lines," she said. "Women don't have the egos that men do."

Francis told a story about two state representatives in Washington state who were notorious opponents in the state House and ended up being elected to city council in the same town.

"They learned how to put party politics aside and work together and get the work done," Francis said. "They ended up passing more ordinances and got more done. I think about that and wonder how many men could do that."

The event, sponsored by the Middlesex County Community Foundation, was held at the Chester Historical Society.

The Middlesex County Community Foundation, based in Middletown, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life in Middlesex County through working with charity-minded individuals and organizations to build permanent endowments and other charitable funds and to support local non-profits.

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