This month, Lena Dunham, wearing a red, white and blue sweater dress with the word “Hillary” emblazoned across the chest, told voters how Hillary Clinton had overcome sexism in her political career.

“The way she has been treated is just more evidence of the fact that our country has so much hatred toward successful women,” Ms. Dunham, the creator and star of the HBO series “Girls,” said at a Clinton campaign event in Manchester, N.H.

But at an Upper East Side dinner party a few months back, Ms. Dunham expressed more conflicted feelings. She told the guests at the Park Avenue apartment of Richard Plepler, the chief executive of HBO, that she was disturbed by how, in the 1990s, the Clintons and their allies discredited women who said they had had sexual encounters with or been sexually assaulted by former President Bill Clinton.

The conversation, relayed by several people with knowledge of the discussion who would speak about it only anonymously, captures the deeper debate unfolding among liberal-leaning women about how to reconcile Mrs. Clinton’s leadership on women’s issues with her past involvement in her husband’s efforts to fend off accusations of sexual misconduct. The issue emerged last month when Mrs. Clinton accused the Republican presidential candidate Donald J. Trump of having a “penchant for sexism” and he in turn accused her of hypocrisy, given her husband’s treatment of women.

Presidential Election 2016

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And in recent weeks, the scandals of the 1990s and Mrs. Clinton’s role in them have taken on a life of their own, delivering an unexpected headache to a campaign predicated on inspiring female voters.

Mrs. Clinton had hoped to galvanize women late last month in her critique of Mr. Trump. Instead, two weeks before the Iowa caucuses, her campaign has found itself trying to shore up support among women as discussions about past Clinton scandals have moved from conservative critics to broader public consciousness. “She’s not a victim. She was an enabler,” Mr. Trump told Fox News last week. “Some of these women have been destroyed, and Hillary worked with” her husband, he said.

Ms. Dunham declined a request for comment. Her spokesperson, Cindi Berger, said that Ms. Dunham was “fully supportive of Hillary Clinton and her track record for protecting women,” and that the description of her comments at the dinner party was a “total mischaracterization.”
But the resurfacing of the scandals of the 1990s has brought about a rethinking among some feminists about how prominent women stood by Mr. Clinton and disparaged his accusers after the “bimbo eruptions,” as a close aide to the Clintons, Betsey Wright, famously called the claims of affairs and sexual assault against Mr. Clinton in his 1992 campaign.

Even some Democrats who participated in the effort to discredit the women acknowledge privately that today, when Mrs. Clinton and other women have pleaded with the authorities on college campuses and in workplaces to take any allegation of sexual assault and sexual harassment seriously, such a campaign to attack the women’s character would be unacceptable.

Back then, Mr. Clinton’s aides, having watched Gary Hart’s presidential hopes unravel over his relationship with Donna Rice in the 1988 Democratic primary race, were determined to quash any accusations against Mr. Clinton early and aggressively, former campaign aides said. Mrs. Clinton had supported the effort to push back against the women’s stories.

Much of her involvement played out behind the scenes and was driven in part by her sense that right-wing forces were using the women and salacious stories to damage her husband’s political ambitions.

Her reflex was to protect him and his future, and early on, she turned to a longtime Clinton loyalist, Ms. Wright, to defend him against the allegations, according to multiple accounts at the time, documented in books and oral histories.

“We have to destroy her story,” Mrs. Clinton said in 1991 of Connie Hamzy, one of the first women to come forward during her husband’s first presidential campaign, according to an exhaustive biography of Mrs. Clinton, “A Woman in Charge,” by Carl Bernstein. (Three people signed sworn affidavits saying Ms. Hamzy’s story was false.)

When Gennifer Flowers later surfaced, saying that she had had a long affair with Mr. Clinton, Mrs. Clinton undertook an “aggressive, explicit direction of the campaign to discredit” Ms. Flowers, according to an exhaustive biography of Mrs. Clinton, “A Woman in Charge,” by Carl Bernstein.

Mrs. Clinton referred to Monica Lewinsky, the White House intern who had an affair with the 42nd president, as a “narcissistic loony toon,” according to one of her closest confidantes, Diane D. Blair, whose diaries were released to the University of Arkansas after her death in 2000.

Ms. Lewinsky later called the comment an example of Mrs. Clinton’s impulse to “blame the woman.”

Americans share their hopes, fears and frustrations in interviews from the campaign trail.
Over the years, the Clinton effort to cast doubt on the women included using words like “floozy,” “bimbo” and “stalker,” and raising questions about their motives. James Carville, a longtime strategist for Mr. Clinton, was especially cutting in attacking Ms. Flowers. “If you drag a hundred-dollar bill through a trailer park, you never know what you’ll find,” Mr. Carville said of Ms. Flowers. (Mr. Carville has maintained that earlier reports indicating that he had made the remark about Paula Jones, another Clinton accuser, were incorrect.)

Now that the stories are resurfacing, they could hamper Mrs. Clinton’s attempts to connect with younger women, who are learning the details of the Clintons’ history for the first time. Several news organizations have published guides to the Clinton scandals to explain the allegations to a new generation of readers.

Alexis Isabel Moncada, the 17-year-old founder of Feminist Culture, a popular blog, was not old enough to remember the 1990s, but lately she and her thousands of young female readers have heard a lot about the scandals.

“I heard he sexually harassed people and she worked to cover it up,” Ms. Moncada said of Mr. and Mrs. Clinton. “A lot of girls in my age group are huge feminists, and we don’t react well to that.”

A warning Mr. Trump issued to Mrs. Clinton on Twitter — “Be careful Hillary as you play the war on women or women being degraded card” — initially grabbed attention last month. Then, Ms. Jones, who had accused Mr. Clinton of exposing himself while she was an Arkansas state employee, and Juanita Broaddrick, an Arkansas nursing home executive who alleged that Mr. Clinton sexually assaulted her in 1978 when he was attorney general of Arkansas, re-emerged in the news media.

Mr. Clinton maintained he was innocent but eventually paid Ms. Jones $850,000 to settle her sexual harassment case. He has denied, through his lawyer, assaulting Ms. Broaddrick.

“You have to give Trump credit,” said Jennifer Weiner, a best-selling novelist and feminist. “He’s a genius at poking and prodding his competitors until he finds their soft spots.”

By reminding voters about the jarring terms that Mr. Clinton and his advisers used to describe these women, Mr. Trump has sought to diminish one of Mrs. Clinton’s biggest strengths: her commitment to helping women.

Mr. Trump’s attacks make Mrs. Clinton look less like “a strong, self-actualized feminist leader who women can proudly get behind,” Ms. Weiner added, and more “like a craven opportunist, and an apologist for a predator.”

Mrs. Clinton’s defenders strongly object to that
characterization and say there is no truth to political adversaries’ accusations that Mrs. Clinton muzzled her husband’s accusers. They note that Ms. Broaddrick, for example, has not provided any evidence to show Mrs. Clinton pressured her to stay silent about the assault accusation.

Many of Mrs. Clinton’s supporters say it is the ultimate act of sexism to hold her culpable for her husband’s transgressions. “Show me the wife who, when she finds out her husband is having an affair with a much younger woman, says, ‘Oh, I feel such sisterhood with her,’” said Katha Pollitt, a feminist poet and columnist for The Nation.

After Mr. Trump’s initial Twitter post, the debate quickly spread to prominent female writers, who offered opinion columns in Cosmopolitan, Slate and New York Magazine, among other outlets. Even the women on “The View” weighed in.

“It’s not about Bill Clinton’s peccadilloes,” said Camille Paglia, a feminist author and professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and a supporter of one of Mrs. Clinton’s rivals, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont. “It’s about Hillary Clinton’s behavior towards her husband’s accusers for all those years.”

Any threat to Mrs. Clinton’s support among women could prove problematic. A CNN/WMUR poll released Tuesday showed that Mr. Sanders had opened up a surprising 27-point lead over Mrs. Clinton in New Hampshire, helped by his support among younger women.

Mrs. Clinton has devoted her campaign to making a priority of issues important to women, including protecting abortion rights, promoting equal pay and combating sexual assault on college campuses — positions that many Democratic women say transcend whatever happened in Mr. Clinton’s campaigns more than two decades ago. “Every survivor of sexual assault deserves to be heard, believed, and supported,” Mrs. Clinton wrote on Twitter in November.

In the past month, two of Mrs. Clinton’s town-hall-style events in New Hampshire have been interrupted with questions about Mr. Clinton’s behavior.

At one, a young woman asked Mrs. Clinton about several women who alleged her husband sexually assaulted them. “You say that all rape victims should be believed,” the woman said. “Should we believe them as well?” Mrs. Clinton replied, “Well, I would say that everybody should be believed at first until they are disbelieved based on evidence.”

Supporters of Mrs. Clinton say Mr. Trump’s strategy could backfire and suggested that the real estate billionaire — who frequently makes remarks about women and their attractiveness — is a poor messenger for a charge of sexism.

“It strains credulity for me to feel like Donald Trump is deeply concerned about the nefarious and terrible effects of slut shaming,” said Nita Chaudhary, a founder of UltraViolet, a women’s advocacy group. But, she added, the way Mr. Clinton’s accusers were treated “was a big ball of ugly.”