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## **Sarah Palin's feminist revolution**

### **When the pro-life politician embraced the F-word, she horrified Democrats -- and electrified her fan base**

By [Rebecca Traister](#)

*This is an excerpt from "[Big Girls Don't Cry](#)," in which author Rebecca Traister uses the 2008 election as a prism through which to examine the past and future of American women in politics, of feminism and women's political empowerment. The following chapter begins with the final stages of the 2008 presidential campaign, as Sarah Palin began to go off her campaign message and most Democratic women were at the height of their loathing for her. However, there were a few, a tiny band of lifelong feminists, who took up with Palin and helped her kick off her mission to capture the language and symbolism of feminism for the right, a mission that remains very much in play two years later. (Read an [interview with Rebecca Traister](#) about the book.)*

There were some Democratic women who believed that feminism meant not just gamely defending Palin against sexist criticism, but supporting her full-throttle. A small number of Democratic women, some livid about the florid ways the vice-presidential candidate was being dissed, some convinced that it was a feminist imperative to back any woman running for executive office, and a few still too sore to embrace Obama, were dissenting. They were angry at the national women's organizations for which some of them had worked and volunteered, and they wanted to make a public stand against them.

In early October Shelly Mandell, the president of Los Angeles NOW, a feminist organizer for more than three decades and chief organizer of the March for Women's Lives in 2004, introduced Sarah Palin at a speech in California. Making clear that she was appearing personally, not on behalf of the National Organization for Women, Mandell told the crowd that she was there "as a women's rights activist for 30 years who has worked for all those years to see this day."

"I'm a lifelong Democrat," said Mandell. "I don't agree with Governor Palin on several issues ... [but] I know Sarah Palin cares about women's rights, she cares about equality, she cares about equal pay, and as vice president she will fight for it." Mandell did not mention that Palin's running mate had been vocal in his denunciation of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. "It is an honor to call her sister," Mandell said. "America, this is what a feminist looks like."

Mandell wasn't the only one to break with feminist opinion on Palin. Elaine Lafferty, the former editor of Ms. magazine who had volunteered for the Clinton campaign, officially signed on as a McCain consultant soon after he picked Palin. Lafferty, coauthor of a book with her friend and Fox News anchor Greta Van Susteren, had a complicated history with institutional feminism. Her two-year stint at Ms., from 2003 to 2005, had been officially successful; under her stewardship the struggling magazine's circulation had jumped, and she had published critically lauded stories. But behind the scenes there had been tension between Lafferty and the Feminist Majority Foundation, which had taken control of publishing Ms. in 2001, about her desire to move the magazine in a more broadly popular direction. At the time of her exit from Ms., Lafferty told the New York Observer, "My vision of Ms. was that it would be a thinking woman's magazine -- a feminist magazine for sure, but my vision of feminism is a big tent ... as the original Ms. was; they didn't check membership cards at the door. I don't believe in dogma, in exclusion or rhetoric. I thought it could be a magazine that invites women into the conversation about how we live today." Lafferty's words would resonate three years later, when criticism of feminism's exclusivity and elitism would be applied by people looking to stretch the movement's defining boundaries not simply outward, but rightward, and in doing so perhaps permanently explode them.

Lafferty came aboard the McCain campaign as Palin's unofficial consigliere on all matters feminist and began helping her with, as Lafferty would call it, "a speech that Palin had long wanted to give on women's rights." That speech took place on Oct. 21 in Henderson, Nev. Behind Palin stood Lafferty and NOW's Mandell, along with another NOW dissenter, former Oregon chapter president Linda Klinge, and Lynn Forester de Rothschild and Prameela Bartholomeusz, both vocal Hillary dead-enders and members of the Democratic National Platform Committee. Palin introduced and thanked the group for their bravery before asking the women in the audience, "Are you ready to break the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America?" She next made a point lifted directly from the Obama-embittered PUMAs: "Somehow Barack Obama just couldn't bring himself to pick the woman who got 18 million votes."

"American women, Democratic, Republican and Independent should not just let Barack Obama take their votes for granted," said Palin, sounding like the millions of Democratic women who had tried, with varying degrees of cogency or lunacy, to express this very conviction to their own party peers.

Then came a part of the speech in which the interest of disenfranchised Democratic women fused with what was unmistakably Palin's own experience of feminism.

"When I was a kid Congress passed a law that's come to be known as Title IX, and that law allowed millions of girls to play sports," she told the crowd. "Over time, that opened more than just the doors to the gymnasium. Along with other reforms, Title IX helped us to see ourselves and our futures a different way. Women of my generation were allowed finally to make more of our own choices with education and with career, and I have never forgotten that we owe that opportunity to women, to feminists who came before us. We were allowed to be participants instead of just spectators [of] the achievements of others."

This was all pretty remarkable coming from a woman who opposed abortion even in cases of rape and incest. It was downright confounding given that she was running alongside a man who voted 19 times against increasing the minimum wage, who voted against the Violence Against Women Act and against funding for the Office of Violence Against Women, who voted against expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act and to terminate funds for family planning. But she wasn't done.

Palin assured anyone surprised by her embrace of a feminist history that "equal opportunity is not just the cause of feminists. It's the creed of our country." Were she given the honor of serving, she said, "I intend to advance that creed in our own nation and beyond, because across the world there are still places where women are subjugated and persecuted as they were in Afghanistan, places where they're bullied and brutalized and murdered in honor killings. ... No one leader can bring an end to all of those ills, but I can promise you this: These women too will have an advocate and a defender in the 47th vice president of the United States." As her speech concluded, Shania Twain's power anthem "She's Not Just a Pretty Face" blared, and Palin embraced the rogue feminists standing behind her.

When I interviewed Lafferty in 2009 she said that just after the election, a teary-eyed Palin asked her, "Why does Gloria Steinem hate me? [She] was my hero. Why do they hate me? I'm a feminist." Lafferty was firm with me: "The woman I met during the campaign and that I was on the plane with was a feminist," meaning that she believed in the professional and economic potential of women, even if she didn't want to make policy to support it. She also believed in a redistribution of domestic work and had said, after giving birth to Trig, "To any critics who say a woman can't think and work and carry a baby at the same time, I'd just like to escort that Neanderthal back to the cave." Even I had to admit that the moment at the end of the vice-presidential debate at which she picked up her infant son had stunned me into silence. I knew the baby was there to advertise Palin's maternal allure, to protect her from criticism, to hammer home her antiabortion bona fides, but still: Seeing a vice-presidential debate in which one of the participants was holding her infant changed everything. As the feminist columnist Ellen Goodman wrote of Palin early on, "Mom to mayor to governor to veep nominee? There's one woman who didn't have trouble raising her hand in class. There's one woman who didn't think she had to be twice as good as a man to run. Be careful what you wish for." In many ways Palin embodied not only feminism's gains but some of its still unmet aspirations.

The question of whether or not Palin "was a feminist" was one that obsessed and troubled lots of women. Katie Couric and I discussed it during our interview in 2009, during which Couric said, "I wrestle with this. ... She's a successful woman. She's running the state of Alaska. She was a vice-presidential candidate. Just because she doesn't believe in choice and she thinks abortion is tantamount to murder. ... What is a feminist? Can you be a conservative feminist? I find this so interesting. ... I think, 'OK, maybe she is a feminist.' Then I think so many of her views indirectly or directly would hurt women. So I go around and around."

Some of the women associated with the earliest iterations of American feminism had also been involved in the conservative Christian temperance battles. Gail Collins would remind readers in "When Everything Changed" that Republican women had been the strongest proponents of women's rights, while heavily Catholic working-class Democratic voters had been more reluctant to mess with gender roles. More recently those dynamics had been reversed by the liberal and radical Democratic women who led the midcentury social movements, and by Republican women who fought against modernization of the American family. Phyllis Schlafly opposed the ERA and pushed American women to stay home with their children, and Marilyn Quayle told the Republican convention in 1992, "Most women do not wish to be liberated from their essential natures as women."

Yet here was not just a candidate, but crowds of Republican women and a few Democratic ones, cheering on Palin's vision in which personal empowerment had no correlation to progressive policy, and beginning to agitate for a reevaluation of the meaning of feminism. On the day of Palin's speech about women, former Republican Massachusetts Gov. Jane Swift, the only woman before Palin to give birth while a sitting governor, told Greta Van Susteren, "There are some on the liberal left who believe that only they have ... an ability to call themselves feminists. ... I think a feminist is someone who believes that women should have equal opportunity to men. ... It is someone like me, like Gov. Palin, who hopes that our daughters, if they work hard and play by the rules, can do virtually anything they want to in their life."

When it came to bullying contests over language, it had never been difficult, historically, to get the feminist movement to hand over its lunch money. Perhaps in part because of its breadth and diversity, perhaps because of a lack of gumption that characterized many on the left in the fourth quarter of the 20th century, perhaps simply because of the manipulative agility of the right, the women's movement lost almost every serious battle over words and imagery in the 40 years following the second wave. The worst and most damaging defeats had come over the language of reproductive rights, in which abortion opponents had gobbled up the vocabulary of life, loss, morality and emotion, while reproductive rights activists persisted with the limply fungible "choice."

The word was meant to convey women's ability to make decisions regarding their own family and reproductive lives, but instead served most frequently as a baseball bat with which pro-lifers could hit feminism in its nuts. If "choice" was really the only word that feminists owned, then didn't that make every choice a feminist act? If the choice to have an abortion and the choice to continue a pregnancy were equally valid, then why, some women wondered, should the choice to give up a career, or stay in a bad relationship, or get breast implants be disparaged or dismaying? A year after Palin's appearance on the McCain ticket, the conservative publication Newsmax ran a series of stories on "the newer feminism" that included one with the telling headline "Feminism Now Defined by Each and Every Woman." No one was quite sure how best to wrest stronger or more assertive language back from the other side.

The word "feminism" itself had not exactly inspired a ferocious defense by its own adherents. For decades the right had successfully demonized women who embraced the label as hirsute succubi, family-scorning and erotically disadvantaged old bags. In 2005 I [wrote a story](#) about old-school feminist organizations wondering whether to retire the much maligned word in favor of a new one, and a new generation of women determined to reclaim it. In recent years I had seen young women sporting "This is what a feminist looks like" shirts, and had read with surprise as teen and 20-something celebrities identified themselves as feminists. Now that "feminist" was slowly clawing its way back to cool, Republicans wanted in. Sarah Palin, charismatic mascot of the you-go-girl spirit and the modern cross-party liberation she represented, had awakened in Republican women a desire to claim a piece of feminism as their own, but they were going to fight to remold it to suit their ideology.

Feminism's history of fluidity and combustibility, which originated with its impossible goal of adequately representing all of the interests of a population that came in innumerable shapes, sizes, colors and identities, also made it legitimately vulnerable to incursions from those of a different ideological caste. The trouble here was that the intruding group was at odds with what was perhaps modern feminism's only truly immutable core value: a woman's right and ability to control her own reproduction.

Lafferty [wrote in the Daily Beast](#), "Palin is being pilloried by the inside-the-Beltway Democratic feminist establishment. ... Yes, she is anti-abortion. And yes, instead of buying organic New Zealand lamb at Whole Foods, she joins other Alaskans in hunting for food. That's it." Lines like this were practically enough to get thoughtful feminists -- who, like Lafferty, wanted to expand the appeal of women's rights advocacy, who wanted more women to proudly celebrate equal opportunity, who wanted to move forward and away from the movement's reputation as exclusive, elite, white and middle class -- to say "Oh, that's it? Anti-abortion and no lamb from Whole Foods? Well, OK then, welcome!" before pausing to consider, "Wait, what was that first thing again?" That thing was at the heart of a very grave question for women's rights activists: Could they work productively alongside women and men with antiabortion stances? Could pro-lifers be feminists? As Couric wondered to me in 2009, "Should the feminist movement say, 'We have certain tenets, but people who are pro-life, we can welcome them. Let's find our common ground to achieve things in other areas.'"

The trouble was that the goal of outlawing abortion (as well as desires to limit access to birth control and sex education) -- not as a matter of personal belief, but as a legislative goal -- was not compatible with feminism if feminism in fact meant supporting women's rights to pursue their life, liberty and happiness on equal footing with men. Not believing in abortion personally was one thing. But preventing other women from exerting full control over their bodies and health, assessing their value as lesser than the value of the fetuses they carried, was, it seemed to me and many others, fundamentally anti-feminist and anti-female.

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Ultimately Palin, like Clinton and Obama before her, was a candidate onto whom millions of voters, and millions of women, had projected their own hopes and dreams and identifications. The fever for Obama had demonstrated the emotional pull of history making. Now I felt a wave coming from the right, coming to wash over feminism.

I was not wrong. Nearly a year to the day that Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded the nomination for the presidency, an organization called the New Agenda would rally its troops in an art gallery in Manhattan for an event called "One for the Herstory Books." The organization's founder, 43-year-old former Wall Street trader Amy Siskind, had gained some notoriety in 2008 as one of the vocal Hillary dead-enders angrily pushing to count unofficial primary votes in Michigan and Florida. Though she never officially called herself a PUMA, in the months during which most Democrats had been rallying around Barack Obama in the general election she had worked to organize them, building a media presence for the New Agenda, which she called "a sisterhood of support." Siskind's sisterhood differed from the feminist organizations that had preceded it by not taking a position on abortion. As she explained on the group's website, "For women in this country to have power, we would need to focus on the issues that unite us, and put aside the issues that divide us. ... When we come to the New Agenda we ask that you put that issue aside and work together on the 80% of issues that impact all women."

Siskind's Wall Street savvy helped to land her a platform. Within weeks of the official formation of the New Agenda she was speaking as "a feminist" on Fox and later on CNN and PBS; she was quoted in the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, the New Republic, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post, and wrote columns for the Daily Beast and the Huffington Post. In these venues Siskind hammered home some fundamental feminist points about the continued wage gap and the toll it takes on both women and men. She assured readers, "The next wave is here. The players are different. The words are different." Perplexingly, she wrote, "Gone is 'equal rights.' ... This wave is about reaching down beneath the surface to eradicate the roots of sexism that lie deeply buried in darkness, ignorance and bias ... Gone is 'feminism.' The word, hijacked by a few into an exclusive clique with liberal, pro-choice rites of entry, is being put to rest."

Siskind's feminism had been loosed from ideology, from policy investments that would otherwise tie it to the nominally more progressive party; it was antipathetic to a commitment to reproductive rights. It was supportive not just of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, but of the burgeoning population of conservative female politicians -- from Meg Whitman and Carly Fiorina (respectively running for governor and senator in California) to Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann -- who did not support economic or social policies that helped women. And it would have an impact on institutional feminism and especially on those feminists who Siskind believed had worked against either Clinton or Palin, like NOW's Kim Gandy. Siskind would claim that Gandy had secretly backed Obama in the primary. (Gandy campaigned for Hillary.) She would assert that Gandy had not defended Palin. (Gandy issued a statement condemning the "onslaught of double-standards and condescension" heaped on the Alaska governor.) At the annual NOW convention in the summer of 2009 some NOW members who had broken with the organization to support Palin campaigned against Latifa Lyles -- the

candidate whom Gandy had endorsed to succeed her as NOW president. Lyles lost the election by eight votes out of 400 cast. Gandy told me, "I've probably been to 34 national conferences and ... this was nasty and vicious and mean in a way I've never seen. I think it's going to be hard healing."

Something had been stirred up, not simply in the Republican Party, but within feminism. It seemed to me that it was a mistake to ignore it. Palin's candidacy had empowered Republican women eager to claim their share of the feminist legacy and transform its institutions by making them more amenable to their antiabortion positions and conservative policy positions. In light of the women's movement's history of losing battles over language and self-presentation, I feared that Elaine Lafferty might have been on to something beyond the candidate she was referring to when, in the days before the election knocked Palin off a presidential ticket but not out of the American consciousness, she wrote in the Daily Beast, "Will Palin's time come next week? I don't know. But her time will come."