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Understanding the Future of Feminism Requires Understanding Conservative Women

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000087

The question of whether or not we still need a women’s movement is legitimate and important, but it usually presumes a conflation of women with feminist. Certainly, significant gains in women’s rights and status are due to decades of feminist activism, but feminists have not been the only ones advocating on behalf of women. Indeed, as long as there have been feminist women’s movements, there have been conservative women contesting them. The increase in the number of conservative women running for office and the growth of a conservative women’s movement prompts further questions about identity and representation, women’s interests, and the future of feminism itself.

Asking the question about the need for a women’s movement thus compels us to delve more deeply into the intersection of gender and ideology and its implications for understanding women’s political activism broadly. There are myriad reasons to study and understand conservative women’s activism in this context; this essay highlights three. First, it requires that we distinguish between feminist and women’s interests and representation as well as find any potential for collaboration among ideologically diverse women. In so doing, we clarify and shape prospective feminist movement goals. Second, in considering the future of feminism, we must recognize the efforts of conservative women and why conservatism might appeal to women. Such exploration highlights where feminism may fall short and/or not speak to all women. Finally,

an examination of conservative women's activism reveals where feminism has been successful, thus providing insights into what has worked in the past and what may sustain or impede future movements.

Women's Interests May Not be Feminist

It is critical to clarify what we mean by women's movements and interests and how ideology factors into this exploration. Indeed, not all advocacy on behalf of women is feminist. Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is an excellent example. STOP-ERA leader Phyllis Schlafly organized as a woman on the behalf of women and provided legitimacy to the opposition because she was a woman.

To best consider the value and future of any women's movements requires that we risk defining feminist and conservative women's interests. This can be complicated and tense. I am often asked if I think Sarah Palin is a feminist. I do not and am quick to say so. Such a response has upset quite a few people because they consider it to be judgmental. Many argue that if Palin thinks she is a feminist, she is one. However, this suggests individual choice is a proxy for feminism and dilutes any differences among women based on ideology and political goals. A better approach, suggested by Nancy Hirschmann (2010), would be to apply feminist standards to evaluating the treatment of all women (e.g., is there media sexism toward Sarah Palin?) but also point out that women may not behave in ways that are feminist. This requires clearly delineating between feminist and conservative women's interests and for feminists to be specific. For example, in 2008, feminist women's organizations were put on the defensive by conservatives for not supporting Palin (Schreiber 2012a). For decades, many feminist organizations and leaders have argued for the need for more women in office, and thus Palin's campaign presented a quandary. Opposing her mandated that feminist leaders and organizations publicly articulate the costs of descriptive representation, an action that makes identity-based organizing vulnerable to criticism. Feminist groups, however, negotiated these tensions by being specific and arguing that what really matters is that elected officials support feminist policy goals, not that elected officials be female. Such elucidation should have positive effects on the legitimacy of future organizing.

Thus, in evaluating whether or not we need a women's movement, we must explicate goals and distinguish between feminist and conservative women's interests. Conservative women eagerly make these distinctions

(even if some of us may disagree with their characterizations of feminism). In interviews with women who represent national conservative women's organizations, most conservative women scoffed at the term "conservative feminism," with one claiming it was oxymoronic.¹

Although there are clear distinctions between feminist and conservative women's goals, there are also issues upon which they can potentially work together. For example, an alliance among women targeted at media sexism would be powerful. Post-2008 election studies confirm what many feminists and conservative women feared — that Palin and Clinton were victims of negative and distorted press coverage when they ran for vice president and president, respectively (see, e.g., Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Heflick and Goldenberg 2009). A coalition of women tackling distorted media coverage of women, no matter what their parties or ideologies, sends a message that sexism still exists and can be an obstacle for all women seeking elective office.² There really is no reason why all women cannot call out media sexism. Indeed, on August 15, 2011, *Newsweek* ran a cover story on Representative Bachmann presenting her in an unflattering photo with the headline, "The Queen of Rage." Feminist and conservative women's organizations expressed disgust with the cover, although they did so independently of one another (Nazworth 2011). It may have taken a negative picture of a conservative woman for both to challenge the media, but future concerted efforts to end media sexism should be encouraged. Such efforts highlight the challenges all women face as they seek legitimacy as political leaders and actors.

A second potential area of overlap is related to motherhood and politics. In interviews conducted with both feminist and conservative women leaders, all of them — whether or not they had children or intended to have children — had the same personal assessment about the challenges facing working mothers: "you can have it all but just not at the same time" (Schreiber 2013).³ Of course there are disputes over what policies should be pursued to best address these tensions, but exploring any commonalities among women gives us information about where gender equality is still lacking and indicates the necessity for future activism.

1. I conducted interviews with leaders of conservative and feminist women's organizations between 2010 and 2013 for an ongoing research project. A list of interviewees is available upon request.

2. For example, Name It. Change It. is a nonpartisan group committed to addressing media sexism: <http://www.nameitchangeit.org>.

3. To be clear, interviewees were mostly white and middle/upper-income women.

Why Are Women Drawn to Conservatism?

To fully assess the future of any feminist movement also requires an understanding of why women are drawn to conservative women's organizations and politics and what they find compelling about them. To put it differently, why might women eschew feminism, and what does this mean for further action? It is also imperative that we do not dismiss women who are drawn to conservative politics; doing so means failing to gain insights into political motivations and behavior. Palin, for example, is a hero to some, and her efforts on behalf of her "Mama Grizzlies" can shape how women view feminist politics. Exit poll data from the 2008 election indicate that the majority of white women voters supported the McCain/Palin ticket, suggesting that some women connected with her and feel better represented by the Republican party.⁴

There are also many conservative women's groups that mobilize young college women and inspire them to pursue conservative activism and politics (e.g., Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute; Network of Enlightened Women). These are not women who want to forego professional careers or politics; many are eager to lead advocacy organizations or run for office. Because the future of any movement depends on the interest of younger participants, listening to new conservative voices is imperative for shaping and understanding prospective movements.

Conservatism as a Beacon for Feminist Movement Successes

Recognizing that conservative women's prominence and activism reflects the success of the feminist movement in making women matter in politics is important for reflecting upon the future of feminist movements. When conservative women's organizations, like Independent Women's Forum (IWF), argue that conservative issues are women's issues, for example (Schreiber 2012b), it demonstrates that the feminist movement has made women's issues matter politically. Such claims also demonstrate that organizing as women on the behalf of women is salient and has political power. Conservative women's organizations and leaders are quite clear that feminism has made an impact, and they shape their agendas accordingly. Thus, studying conservative women's advocacy highlights where feminism has made an impact and what lessons can be learned for the future.

4. These data can be found at <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main/>.

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Why Feminist Theory Matters for Feminist Practice: The Case of Rape Response

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000099

Rape crisis centers, which provide supportive services to survivors of sexual assault, are commonly lauded as one of the most successful and lasting transformations achieved by second-wave feminism (Bevacqua 2000; Martin 2005; Schmitt and Martin 2007). But the advocates who work in these centers overwhelmingly reject the use of the word "feminist" to describe themselves or the work of their agencies (Campbell, Baker, and Mazurak 1998; Corrigan 2013; Maier 2008). Here, I describe this puzzling disconnect between feminist consciousness and feminist practice and offer a theory of why the incorporation of feminist analysis could enrich the provision of services on the ground.

Between 2005 and 2008, I interviewed more than 150 advocates at roughly 100 rape crisis centers across 6 states about policy and