

For women, work and family create political minefield

Posted by [sroux](#) September 06, 2008 21:35PM



Michael Lloyd / The Oregonian "I won't vote for Sarah Palin because I disagree with her on the issues, but I do not question her competence because she is a mother," says Rep. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, here with husband Peter and their children, (from left) Ellie, 10; Maia, 7 (in Sara's lap); Nicole, 8; and Sam, 13; at their Corvallis home.

Meet Sara, a flinty brunette and rising politico with an adoring family behind the lectern: a devoted husband, lovely daughters and a son with a Down syndrome-like disorder.

Not Gov. Sarah Palin -- Rep. Sara Gelser, a Corvallis Democrat with four children younger than 13 who first ran for public office nursing a 3-month-old. After advocating for her oldest child, Sam, she went on to be elected to the local school board and then to the Oregon House.

In the topsy-turvy nature of this presidential campaign, liberals have been scandalized by Palin's return to work three days after giving birth, and conservatives have been inspired by her typical family. Families of children with Down syndrome have been thrilled at the prospect of a larger, bipartisan conversation about their children's potential.

But Sara Gelser could have told the other Sarah long ago that voters judge a mother with young children differently from the way they do a father.

One voter once told Gelser he couldn't support a candidate "who couldn't keep a commitment. You've got four children. Certainly when you had them, you intended to mother them."

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"I was like, 'Wow,'" Gelser said. "I didn't understand why it was anyone's business but mine and my husband's."

Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster and national strategist said that voters worry about who will raise the children if a mother is elected. For men it's like, "Great! He will care about the future."

"It's one of the clearest double standards still left in politics," Lake said.

"It's a double bind"

Much of the emotion around Palin arises from women's own recent parenting experiences.

"I do think her family needs her more right now than the Republicans do," said Judy Turner, a Northwest Portland mother of three small children who left a high-powered job for a more flexible arrangement as a consultant. "A special-needs child and a pregnant teen daughter need extensive support, love and attention from both parents. I believe she is making the wrong choice and setting a poor example for the country."

But Rep. Linda Flores, a Republican mother of five grown children from Clackamas, cheers the complex Palin family portrait.

"This is a real person who has real life experiences," Flores said. "And she is the best person to gauge whether her family can handle this."

"Besides," Flores said, "if she were a man, we wouldn't even be having this discussion."

Political scientists say Flores is right. Motherhood is so complicating that most women wait until their children are older to pursue higher office -- like Flores and U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. -- or they downplay the presence of youngsters altogether. U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., for instance, didn't disclose her 2006 pregnancy -- the first in Congress in a decade -- until after she was re-elected.

"The picture of the candidate with the spouse, the kids and the golden retriever is priceless for a male, but sometimes the female candidate won't even put the picture in the brochure," said Debbie Walsh, director of Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Walsh said that as a result, fewer women than men in Congress and in state legislatures have children younger than 18. Women enter office later in life, have shorter political trajectories, and thus, are less likely to become leaders.

"It's a double bind," said Melody Rose, an associate professor and chairwoman of the political science division at Portland State University. "If a woman waits, she may postpone her chances to rise to leadership, and if she has young children, she comes under intense scrutiny for her mothering. It's like the woman who wants to have children and a political career simply cannot win."

Progress slow

Even as the number of women entering medicine, law and other professions continues to climb, women's ascent has been very gradual in Congress and flat in state legislatures, Walsh said.

Women make up about 16 percent of both houses of Congress, 24 percent of state legislators and 16 percent of mayors of cities with populations over 30,000. Palin is one of just eight women governors.

Gelser said she and her husband, Peter, have balanced her legislative career by relying on his caregiving, extended family and constantly talking to their children about what is important to them. She's sought advice from the grown children of other Oregon legislators and staged memorable family moments, such as a mock family debate on the deserted House floor or a night singalong in the Rotunda.

Sam Gelsler, who has a rare developmental disability called FG syndrome, told his mother during opening day of the 2007 session how proud he was of her.

Still, when people contacted Gelsler about running for retiring Rep. Darlene Hooley's seat, Gelsler declined, in part because she saw only about 10 women in Congress with children younger than 18.

"I do think if I had seen 20 or 30 women you could see how it would work and how you can still have kids who are happy and healthy," she said.

The mommy war debate that has eclipsed discussions last week has frustrated Andrea Paluso, a Northeast Portland mother of two who writes for the Web site www.activistas.us. She calls it politically expedient in drawing attention from policies in both campaigns that truly affect families.

"We can't envision a world that is flexible enough and provides options for women to be successful at both work and a life because the vast majority of parents do not have what they need to do that," she said. "Instead we get sucked into a debate over whether women can have a big job and a big family, and that is really shortsighted."

-- Julie Sullivan; juliesullivan@news.oregonian.com

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Comments

AJH says...

Is it time to ask everyone man or woman these questions whether they are capable of dealing with the dynamics of their families or should we not raise the question at all. I vote for not asking/raising the question. Hell - I think the women are more capable then men in dealing with stress and everyday schedules and all that stuff. It's sexist to think otherwise - don't let the media and the opposition (either side) get away with making these a point of contention.

Posted on 09/07/08 at 12:39AM

realwrld101 says...

Palin seems to be a very bitter pill for the Democrats. There were no complaints or issues with Hillary Clinton, and there would not have been any if she had the identical family situation as Palin. This "political minefield" issue has its roots in one main point, Palin is a conservative republican. In the initial rush to make Palin look like a bad choice by McCain, the liberal writers used a surprising tactic, sexism. Questions were raised about her "need to be at home with the kids," or "she has too much responsibility at home to serve as VP" or "a special needs child should come first." In the end this is thinly veiled sexism. What do you think the CNN would say of Fox News asking these same questions of Hillary assuming Hillary was in the same exact situation as Palin? This lays bare an issue the far left has had for some time. They are for women's rights, for black American's, that is, uh, as long as you are not a conservative like Palin or Clarence Thomas. So many on the far left, not the majority of the Democrats, are for secular fascism. Believe what "we leftists" believe and we are open minded, believe in conservative values and you are vilified without justification. That is the far left's biggest problem today, they are not liberal because they are not open minded. This is a lesson I hope many Democrats learn, and I hope change for the better. They can ill afford allowing the far left Michael Moore crowd from taking too large a position in the party.

Posted on 09/08/08 at 10:24AM

coloradojeff says...

realwrld-

Are you for real? Bad choice in screen names. People on the left are not liberal because they are not open minded enough????! WTF

I admit Karl Rove (he made this Palin pick, by the way) was brilliant. If you question her it's sexist, if you question McCain...well how dare you attack a POW. They're both untouchable!

Hillary only had 1 child who happened to be 13 and not disabled when Bill was sworn in so you can't compare. I'm sure if the shoe had been on the other foot...the Repubs would have crucified her.

That is by far the ONLY criticism of Palin. She is a FAR-right winger. Who believes in abstinence only...as long as it's not her kid!!! She is the kind of woman that ties the hands of other women as far as choice goes. She belongs to an end-of-times Dominionist church that believes we should rape the earth and all it's resources just because we can.

As far as fascism.... look up the definition. I'll do it for you...it's when government and corporation merge. If we are not living in a fascist country under Bush...I'll eat my hat.

It will only continue to get worse with McCain/Palin. His entire campaign is run by lobbyists and she is in the oil/natural gas pocket.

Your own parties "spiritual leader" James Dobson has said for years and years that the problem with the modern American family was that the wife didn't stay home with the children. He has now endorsed McCain/Palin. What a bunch of hypocrites!!!

As far as Clarence Thomas. Do a little research,my friend. He is a dim bulb, regardless of color.

Posted on 09/08/08 at 2:02PM

realwrld101 says...

Colorado,

Thanks for proving my point. I see Obama as a solid example to the black community, especially his family situation. I disagree with his stance on issues as well as his leftist view of the world. The reason I can look objectively is because I use my intellect. Sure there are people who are intelligent, Obama is one example, who are on the left. Remember liberal means open to consider views other than your own even if you do not agree. Now let's review your comments and you can compare them to mine for review. Which is open minded.

☹️Are you for real?☹️ No issues or substance. ☹️Bad choice of screen names.☹️ Name calling with no thoughtful comment. ☹️WTF.☹️ No comment needed. ☹️If you question her it is sexist.☹️ I did not say that you inferred it and yes your inference was incorrect. Re-read my first post. If you question McCain how dare you attack a POW. I do not know why you are going this direction as it has nothing to do with my post. I will not break down any further as you are obviously not open to consider the reality of what was said. You lead yourself to react without truly considering what was said.

This is exactly what I was saying the Democratic party has done, become ideologues who never try to consider the other view. I wish my point was not proven so quickly, it is not a good thing.

Posted on 09/08/08 at 7:54PM

JaneACM says...

The author contacted me via email when writing this story, but didn't use my comments. I've added them here:

"Raising a family is hard work and can be all-consuming even in the best of circumstances. Gov. Palin's being proclaimed as the 'pro-family' candidate so I can only hope that as she tries to balance the grueling demands of campaigning and the possibility of a vice presidency with her role as a mother, she and her husband will put their children and their family needs first. So far that's not what she seems to be doing. A mother who puts her children first would not publicly announce her daughter's unplanned pregnancy thereby thrusting her in the spotlight. Being 'pro-family' is a lot more than pushing for certain pieces of legislation. I'm waiting to see how she 'walks the talk.'

"I do believe women can balance family and a career--many have done it very successfully. I'm anxious to see how Gov. Palin handles the enormous challenges both within her family and through the political path she's recently embarked upon. I think any candidate--man or woman--facing her particular set of circumstances would find the it extremely difficult to be effective in all areas of one's life."

I want to add now that I've read the article, it's not exactly comparing apples to apples in comparing Sara to Sarah. It's not clear what public office Sara ran for "when nursing a 3 month old"--I assume something local and smaller in scope than the local school board since it says she "went on" to that role and then later to the OR House. This is vastly different than the Sarah Palin who has an infant son with special needs, 4 add'l children, a grandchild on the way while who is running for VP--an office that would be thousands of miles away from her current home.

Is it sexist to bring that up? Possibly, but as my comment above states, I think anyone would be challenged by her set of circumstances. We cannot compare her to others and try to draw conclusions. As a mother of three young children who works (parttime, as a consultant), I know that it's impossible for anyone to "have it all" and her stance as "pro-family" simply doesn't ring true to me.

Posted on 09/08/08 at 11:34PM

JaneACM says...

realwrld101,

I have to ask what in the world you meant by your statement that Obama is a "solid example to the black community, especially his family situation"? Can you explain to this white woman why he wouldn't be an example to me? Why single out "the black community"?

Posted on 09/08/08 at 11:41PM

klh says...

I agree with most of what you said, realwrld, except that the media and the far left of the Democratic Party DID treat Hillary Clinton with sexism also. It's been a very painful thing for me, as a Democratic woman, to have observed this election year. And I was sickened and outraged how so many in my so-called party of "women's issues" so viciously made personal attacks not only Sarah Palin but on her 17 y.o. daughter. I am proud that Hillary Clinton herself congratulated John McCain and Sarah Palin on the pick and has stuck to policy differences in her speeches. I was disappointed that Obama has denied there was any sexism involved and only said that children should be left alone after reporters asked him about it -- why didn't he direct his campaign to immediately issue a statement decrying the personal attacks on Palin's children, the way John McCain's campaign immediately issued a statement supporting Obama's displeasure with The New Yorker cartoon cover? I agree that the Democratic party has been taken over by almost a fanatic mentality this year, and the media has aided and abetted it with uncritical adoration instead of objective and fair reporting. However, I was gratified (and envious) that the Republicans stood by Sarah Palin and quickly labeled and denounced the sexism. And the backlash among the majority of decent people in this country seems to have finally registered somewhat on the media. That's my hope anyways. Women's viewpoints are as diverse as men's, and true feminists celebrate the achievements of women, regardless of our differences of opinions on particular issues. I'm personally thrilled with the choice of Gov. Palin. She has more experience and record of "change we can believe in" than Obama, and for all his words about the "politics of divisiveness", his team plays a mean, sarcastic game themselves. (How many times did we hear John McCain being made fun of for his 7 houses?)

Posted on 09/08/08 at 11:47PM

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