

Empowered women in the religious right

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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During the last election cycle, we heard a lot of talk about the “war on women.” Often, it didn't feel like a hyperbole. Democrats would look at Republican women, shake their heads, and say, “How could they possibly be a part of a political movement where they are so disempowered?”

I was shocked and saddened by much of the Republican rhetoric when it came to women's issues. Thanks to the Religious Right agenda, our national dialogue took great strides backwards in the arenas of gender equality. Much of their speech centered on some serious misinformation about some basic biological functions (highlights being that a [legitimate rape does not cause pregnancy](#), a rape is [something God intends to happen](#), and the [pill is the same thing as an abortion](#)).

It would be easy for those of us who lean to the Left of the political spectrum to dismiss the Right by saying that they are waging a war on women, but that would deny the whole picture. What about Sarah Palin? What about Michelle Bachmann? And what about the other Grizzly Mamas who are being plucked, groomed and prepared as we speak?

I loved reading [Alisa Harris' Raised Right](#), because it reminded me so much of my own teen experience. As a young woman, she was formed and nurtured in political thinking. It was part of her faith journey. And that's common among Religious Right circles.

Can you name many up-and-coming progressive women who are influenced or nurtured by religious groups? Who are the smart, young feminists who are thinking about policy issues in light of their faith? Who are the women we are teaching the art of the sound bite to? Who are the ones progressives are grooming for office? I know a lot of women who are qualified, but I can't really point to any one who is being nurtured like our good old boys are. When I talk to men and women who are trying to do this work, they often confide to me, "It's hard to get any funding. When we tell someone that we're a Christian organization then we lose our money from

progressives. When Christians find out that we're trying to do social justice work, they don't want to support us either."

The truth is that young women are empowered in the Religious Right. They are groomed and they are educated to join the movement against gender equality. Their power can be reduced to their biological functions—in the sense that the core of their fight and causes tend to be focused on pro-life issues and protecting their notion of the family. And women are often sexualized—in the sense that this [stunning piece of footage](#) has gotten four million hits. But we really cannot deny women are empowered in the religious wing of conservative thought—which seems to be more than religious progressives are doing.

Do I think that we need to emulate what the Religious Right is doing? No. But I do think we need to be honest about how little Christian Progressives do to support women. Simply belittling conservatives does not do much to help women thrive in our society.