

# (RE)PRODUCTIVE CONVENTIONS

In one way, the DNC was almost the same as the RNC last week. Almost every woman who spoke self-identified as a mother. (This is a point Irin Carmon also made in this piece.) Lily Ledbetter was one exception; she didn't mention her daughters and grand-daughters until the end, until she had talked about her life as a tire factory worker. And Jared Polis—whose legal right to be one is contested in many states—is the one man I remember foregrounding his fatherhood. Thus, at conventions dueling over women's votes, they appealed largely (though reproductive health was a key issue last night) through motherhood, not womanhood.

Which is funny, because Democrats, at least, are reaching out not just to soccer moms, but they're also reaching out to single women who are not yet mothers.

All that being said, Ann Romney and Michelle Obama presented different pictures of motherhood—or rather, parenthood.

Here's Ann Romney's pitch to the plight of women—which in her case is very explicitly limited to mothers, even though she admits some mothers also happen to be sisters or maybe she treats sisters as mothers of a type.

Sometimes I think that late at night, if we were all silent for just a few moments and listened carefully, we could hear a great collective sigh from the moms and dads across America who made it through another day, and know that they'll make it through another one tomorrow. But in that end of the day moment, they just aren't sure how.

And if you listen carefully, you'll hear the women sighing a little bit more than the men. It's how it is, isn't it?

It's the moms who always have to work a little harder, to make everything right.

It's the moms of this nation – single, married, widowed – who really hold this country together. We're the mothers, we're the wives, we're the grandmothers, we're the big sisters, we're the little sisters, we're the daughters.

You know it's true, don't you?

You're the ones who always have to do a little more.

You know what it's like to work a little harder during the day to earn the respect you deserve at work and then come home to help with that book report which just has to be done.

You know what those late night phone calls with an elderly parent are like and the long weekend drives just to see how they're doing.

You know the fastest route to the local emergency room and which doctors actually answer the phone when you call at night.

You know what it's like to sit in that graduation ceremony and wonder how it was that so many long days turned into years that went by so quickly.

When Ann says, "you're the ones who always have to do a little more," she's not directly addressing her example of the woman who has to "work a little harder" to earn the respect she deserves. Rather, she's noting that the same woman who is treated unfairly at work also has to deal with kids' homework when she gets home. The same woman has to deal with the troubles of elderly parents. The same woman has to know how to get her family to the emergency room—what happens if she herself has to go, I wonder?

Ann's appeal to women only works—that extra sigh

coming from women only happens—if women are expected to carry out more than half the nurturing roles in a family.

And that may well have been the case for her (even if she had staff to help). When she delivered these lines, I really wondered whether some of what she was expressing was regret about having to raise 5 boys mostly on her own. I had the feeling again when, after rehearsing how hard Mitt worked to make Bain Capital a success, she said, “It allowed us to give our sons the chance at good educations and made all those long hours of book reports and homework worth every minute,” as if the Bain success came at the expense of Mitt helping with book reports.

Compare that with the images of involved parenting Michelle gave. First, there’s her father, who defined manhood as making incredible sacrifices for his family.

But every morning, I watched my father wake up with a smile, grab his walker, prop himself up against the bathroom sink, and slowly shave and button his uniform. And when he returned home after a long day’s work, my brother and I would stand at the top of the stairs of our little apartment, patiently waiting to greet him, watching as he reached down to lift one leg, and then the other, to slowly climb his way into our arms.

But despite these challenges, my dad hardly ever missed a day of work. He and my mom were determined to give me and my brother the kind of education they could only dream of. (Applause.)

And when my brother and I finally made it to college, nearly all of our tuition came from student loans and grants. But my dad still had to pay a tiny portion of that tuition himself. And every semester, he was determined to pay that bill right on time, even taking out

loans when he fell short. He was so proud to be sending his kids to college, and he made sure we never missed a registration deadline because his check was late.

**You see, for my dad, that's what it meant to be a man.** (Applause.) Like so many of us, that was the measure of his success in life – being able to earn a decent living that allowed him to support his family. [my emphasis]

In spite of the fact that we know Michelle's mom, who still helps her normalize the life of being the First Family, it is Michelle's father who gets the focus here.

And her suggestion, in the passages that describe Obama spending time fathering between hard decisions running the world, is that Obama would meet her own father's definition of manhood (and, if Ann's suggestions that she did the hard parenting are true, Mitt is not).

He's the same man, when our girls were first born, would anxiously check their cribs every few minutes to ensure that they were still breathing – (laughter) – proudly showing them off to everyone we knew.

You see, that's the man who sits down with me and our girls for dinner nearly every night, patiently answering questions about issues in the news, strategizing about middle school friendships. (Laughter.)

She may not have raised book reviews, but there Obama is, worrying about Sasha and Malia's friends even as President.

Now, for better or worse (and I think it is problematic, as I hope to return to), both of these women are describing the President as father. For Mitt, he'll be the amazing

breadwinner, even if it means leaving poor sighing women to hold the nation's family structure together.

In Michelle's case, she goes directly from describing Obama's talking about his own girls' day at school to reading letters from Americans (a practice Rahm had introduced earlier in the night).

That's the man I see in those quiet moments late at night, hunched over his desk, poring over the letters people have sent him. The letter from the father struggling to pay his bills, from the woman dying of cancer whose insurance company won't cover her care, from the young person with so much promise but so few opportunities.

I see the concern in his eyes and I hear the determination in his voice as he tells me, "You won't believe what these folks are going through, Michelle – it's not right. We've got to keep working to fix this. We've got so much more to do."

Which given she spent her time modeling Obama's parenting, not her own—her role is mom, as described here, is aspiring for the girls' future, not helping with book reports (though I'm sure she does help)—makes her punch line about first mom that much more interesting.

Both of these parties are espousing a very family-oriented model for the nation, In one, Daddy makes the money and Mommy does all the hard work. In the other, Daddy nurtures just as much as Mommy.

But particularly since these speeches were largely about reaching out to women voters, it's a pretty limited view of motherhood—to say nothing of how limiting the relational identity for women always is (though I expect Obama to talk plenty about being a father).