



Angela Sasseville and her two daughters Cosette, 2, left, and Oriel, 7, read a book at their Denver home, Saturday, Sept. 27, 2008. Sasseville is a member of MomsRising, a group that aims to get Palin to clarify where she stands on issues like paid maternity leave, family medical leave, equal pay for equal work, and the like. (AP Photo/Jack Dempsey)



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Some moms are asking: Would Palin help us as VP?

By JOCELYN NOVECK – 22 hours ago

NEW YORK (AP) — As Sarah Palin gets set for this week's debate grilling on topics from foreign policy to the economy, some fellow working mothers are hoping she'll get grilled on something else, too: Her ability to stand up for them in Washington.

Sure, Palin is a working mother herself, something that women voters across the political spectrum have noted with genuine excitement. But what, some women want to know, would Palin do for them as vice president? Would she stand for paid maternity leave? Expanded family leave and flexible work hours? Better health care?

"Where is she on all of this? I just don't feel any empathy from her as a woman," says Nina Dulabaum, a Chicago educator and mother who is a self-described independent voter.

A group of fellow mothers connected to the grass roots group MomsRising tried to ask such questions of the Alaska governor last week. Putting their questions in writing, they went to her Washington office to leave their petition, the group says — but were told they needed to mail it instead. (Palin herself was in New York.)

The group is concerned that Palin hasn't shared her positions on the hot-button issues concerning working women, says Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, who co-founded MomsRising three years ago. And while the members — close to 200,000, she says — are "absolutely delighted" to see a working mom on center stage, they're also quite aware of the differences between Palin, who had her fifth child only months ago as governor, and many other women.

"Look at what she had: preset pay, health care, paid sick days, a salary high enough so her husband could help care for the baby," says Rowe-Finkbeiner. "Unfortunately that is not the case for most working mothers."

She notes that more than 170 countries have mandated paid maternity leave — all except four: Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, Liberia and the United States. (A few states have adopted their own provisions.)

Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign, said that a McCain-Palin administration would support workplace flexibility, telecommuting and "making health care more portable for today's changing economy."

"As a working mom, Governor Palin understands the challenges American families face balancing life at home and in the workplace," she said. "As Governor, Sarah Palin has worked to make sure parents have flexibility so they can meet the demands of family life and their jobs."

Palin has drawn much attention with her choice to return to work soon after giving birth. But women like Angela Sasseville, a Denver mother who's struggled for years to achieve the right balance of career and family, thinks that's the wrong message for a woman in a powerful job to send other mothers, for whom it's simply not realistic for many reasons: their own health and that of the baby, inadequate child care, inflexible work hours.

"What if she'd said, 'I'm going to take the time I need?' Now THAT would have been an empowering message," says Sasseville, a self-employed psychotherapist who plans to vote for Barack Obama.

An Associated Press-Yahoo News poll taken Sept. 5-15 showed McCain and Obama running about even among working women, but McCain leading Obama among working women with children at home. In a more recent poll by Gallup, though, Obama led among all working women, including those with children under 18.

And recent surveys have shown that her popularity overall, while still strong, has begun to fade. In one, a Fox News-Opinion Dynamics poll, her net positive rating shrunk from 27 points in early September to 11 points a week ago. At the same time, the candidate has been widely perceived to have struggled through a pair of TV interviews, particularly the recent one with Katie Couric of CBS.



For a time, the narrative on Palin was dominated by questions of whether the self-proclaimed hockey mom with five kids — including a pregnant teenage daughter and a baby boy with Down syndrome — should be running at all, given those responsibilities.

Ellen Bravo, an expert on workplace issues at the University of Wisconsin, thinks that was the wrong question. The choice was Palin's to make, says Bravo, an activist for family friendly policies.

"But it IS the voters' business to know how she will help or hinder them in their lives," says Bravo. "The problem is, there's just not that much information out there."

For example, she notes, women with special-needs children were excited when Palin declared in her convention speech that they'd "have a friend and advocate in the White House." Now, she says, she hears women asking: "What will I do when the school calls and says I need to come right away, but if I leave work I'll be written up? I need flexible hours. Will she help me with that?"

Comella said Palin had a record of improving special education, including signing legislation this year that increased spending for special needs students in Alaska.

There are those who feel that no matter what her positions, Palin's ascent to national prominence will help working mothers. One of them is Carol Evans, CEO of Working Mother Media Inc.

First, she says, it's about visibility. "This is putting our issues front and center in every discussion," she says. But also, she adds, it aligns conservatives — traditionally chillier to the concept of women in the workplace — with the cause of working women, and moreover women in so-called "extreme jobs" — CEOs, partners, doctors and lawyers, those in overseas postings and the like.

"That's where the pushback has been the last 10 years," says Evans, whose company publishes Working Mother magazine. "Now you have the usual doubters lining up behind Sarah Palin and saying she can do it! It's a topsy-turvy world."

That's all fine and good, says Bravo, of the University of Wisconsin. But in the end, she says, "what matters to most voters is what affects their pocketbooks — their health care, their own ability to manage. The symbolic stuff doesn't trickle down very far."

Dulabaum, of Chicago, has been trying to look beyond the symbolism, and hasn't seen enough there. With three small children, she's been seeking full-time work for several years. Instead she's settled for a combination of part-time jobs.

Dulabaum says that when Palin burst onto the scene, colleagues told her, "You must be so excited!" And she hoped to be.

But, she says, "I've heard her say nothing about fair pay, about family medical leave. I don't hear her coming out with any strong stance on any of these family issues."