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Angry Moms

A brief history of maternal indignation in American politics, from Mother Jones to Michele Bachmann.

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Michele Bachmann in Monday's GOP presidential debate

Going into the most recent Republican presidential debate on Monday, Michele Bachmann's [advisers told the *New York Times*](#) that they worried about the candidate's ability to take on Rick Perry, who'd stolen much of her thunder among Tea Party supporters.

A "woman attacking is perceived as shrill," the Minnesota congresswoman's advisers were paraphrased as saying. Political pollster Kellyanne Conway told me that research into

voters' attitudes tends to bear this out. Female politicians "can't even do passion without being perceived as being angry," Conway said, describing the narrow emotional tightrope women candidates must walk. And "angry women are looked upon as everything from mentally unstable to menopausal."

On Monday night, Bachmann found a way around this conundrum. When, well into the debate, she finally went after Perry, she played the well-established archetype of the outraged mother. In criticizing Perry's decision as Texas governor to vaccinate schoolgirls against the sexually transmitted HPV virus, her first words were, "I'm a mom." (Mother to five and foster mother to 23, as she constantly reminds audiences.) Then: "To have innocent little 12-year-old girls be forced to have a government injection thru an executive order is just flat out wrong." Cue the cheers. After that, the congresswoman was on fire, calling on moderator Wolf Blitzer for more time so she could accuse Perry of cronyism because of his connections to the drug company manufacturing the vaccine.

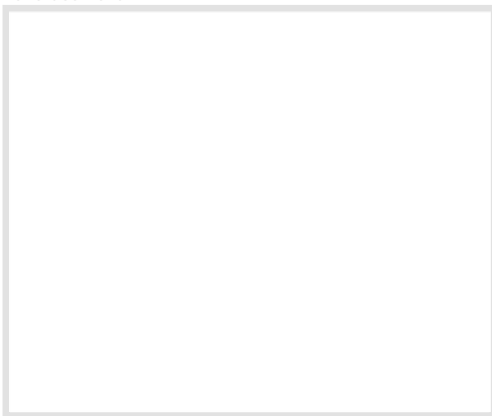
And just like that, Bachmann managed to channel righteous indignation while sidestepping cultural fears of the angry woman. This was no meager feat. The angry woman charge, as [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Michelle Obama](#), both know, is a wounding accusation, right up there with its cousins, the ugly feminist and the man-hating

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lesbian. When Shannon O'Brien, Mitt Romney's Democratic opponent in the 2002 gubernatorial race, hit Romney hard for "waffling" on abortion, Romney called her attacks "unbecoming." Ladies, the implication went, don't get aggressive.

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"An angry man can seem like a righteous champion," said Ruth B. Mandel, who directs the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers and studies women's political history. As for a woman, she said, "You have permission to be angry if you're fighting for children."

Sarah Palin's calls during the 2010 midterms for a "[mama grizzly movement](#)" channeled this same source of safe female anger. The righteous mom is mostly insulated from charges of too much

emotion—her anger is not threatening because it reflects traditionally feminine domestic concerns. She is also deeply relatable to anyone who has kids. And the righteous mom occupies the moral high ground. A mother knows what's best for her children, right? The mom card is therefore a trump card; what opponent would dare impugn the motives of a candidate mother and, by extension, the nation's mothers?

But the righteous mom draws her power from a fairly narrow sphere, hearkening back at least as far as the Victorian-era view that women were the moral guardians of the culture. It's worth noting that one of the earliest calls to celebrate Mother's Day envisioned it as a moment of political activism. In 1870, in response to the Civil War and the coming Franco-Prussian War, suffragette and pacifist Julia Ward Howe wrote a poem she called her Mother's Day Proclamation. It called for an international alliance of mothers dedicated to stopping the bloodshed.

Nowadays, if the concerns of motherhood can be a launching pad for women in politics, [as they were for Bachmann](#), it can also be risky to focus too much on them. A modern-day candidate who draws too much on her family biography is in danger of reinforcing stereotypes about the limitations of her gender. And she risks suggesting to voters that she sees the world first and foremost from the vantage point of her own doorstep.