

# Fighting Bob Fest

## ARVONNE FRASER SPEECH TRANSCRIPT

SEPTEMBER 6, 2008

### WOMEN, POLITICS AND THE WORLD

I'M DELIGHTED TO TALK TO PROGRESSIVES. AFTER A WEEK OF THE REPUBLICAN CONVENTION THIS EVENT IS LIKE A GOOD BREATH OF FRESH AIR.

I didn't realize when I agreed to come here and talk on Women, Politics and the World that we'd have a gun toting, pro-life woman who calls herself a feminist as the nominee for vice-president of the U.S. Now, I ardently support women's participation in politics as an elected official, a campaign worker or working on the issues. I helped organize the National Women's Political Caucus and Women's Campaign Fund.

But I consider Governor Palin's nomination an insult to the thinking American public. Politics is serious business. It's the art and science of governing. In a democracy no major party should nominate for vice president a religious zealot who wants to ban books from public libraries and believes guns solve problems. The idea that she could be a heart beat away from having her finger on the nuclear button sends chills down my spine.

I'm scared and sad—and mad! What was McCain thinking? Did those years in Vietnam warp more than his body? Damage his perspective? A president should be thoughtful, not compulsive, responsible, not irresponsible. He or she should show judgment above all and I fear that was lacking in this case.

I believe it is the deep obligation of every progressive in this nation to speak out, to talk to every possible person between now and Election Day and make sure they understand that politics is not entertainment, not just a game or the subject of gossip. Politics is about what we want for this country and how we govern ourselves. Government is an awesome responsibility in which we all play a part.

I could go on but you all know what we have to do between now and Nov. 4. It's simply get out the right voters!

So, let me talk about women, politics and the world and what you may not be reading in the papers or seeing and hearing about on TV. That's human rights, really the basis of democracy—respect for the individual citizen-- and the right and ability to exercise the responsibilities that go with being an equal citizen, respected by government and by other citizens. Human rights on the international level include not just civil and political rights—the right to vote and the rule of law-- but economic and social rights—the right to security, including social security in the broadest sense of that phrase—what we call social welfare. And you here in Wisconsin should be proud that it was U of Wisconsin/Madison that designed and help implement our U.S. Social Security system. Economic and social rights also include the right to education; the right to employment and decent benefits from employment. Human rights, in short, are the basis on which democracies are built and maintained. Elections do not a democracy make; human rights do.

I've spent the last three decades working, organizing and writing about women's human rights on a global scale—helping women organize to gain and maintain their rights and encouraging implementation of the international women's human rights treaty—called CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This treaty wasn't written by U.S. women and our country hasn't even ratified it but almost every other country in the world has. This women's human rights treaty—CEDAW-- was written by progressive women from Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia with a little help from U.S. women. The unique thing about it is that it combines civil and political rights with economic and social rights.

The reason for writing this treaty was that the problem for women, worldwide, has been that most cultures—including our own—have held the view that men run the world and women take care of the home and family. And, in most countries, especially those without good legal systems, culture becomes law. Men were the governors, women and children the governed.

So thoughtful, progressive women organized and they still are organizing. We just don't hear much about it—it's under the radar often because, in many countries of the world it's illegal to organize without government permission—for women and men!

Organizing is a political act. Organizing for progressive change scares governments. The next thing you know these people might organize to overthrow the government is the worry of autocrats—and even incumbents.

Worldwide, women organized to get educated and provide education. They organized and are still organizing to change laws which said women's wages earned outside the home belonged to the legal head of the family—husband or father. They organized to get custody of their own children when a marriage ended through death, divorce or desertion. They organized to be allowed to hold and manage property and, of course, they organized to be able to vote and hold

office. Later they organized to be able to legally--and without too much trouble--get birth control devices and for the legality of abortion. (We're still doing that, even in the U.S.!)

The result of this organizing by progressive women, over centuries, is this international human rights treaty and a lot of legal changes in many countries. That's the good news. The bad news is that cultures are hard to change and change brings resistance. Rulers don't like the unruly--those who organize to change the rules.

And too often those who rule or think they have the right to rule--whether by culture, custom or religious zealotry--resort to violence to enforce what they believe the rules are or ought to be.

Look at the Taliban in Afghanistan. When they first took power in the 1990s what did they do? They closed girls schools; they forbade women from working outside the home; and they told women they had to cover themselves up when in public--become invisible. What happened to women who didn't obey? They were beaten or in some cases killed. What did progressive women in Afghanistan do? They went underground, organized and held schools in their homes but they covered themselves up when they went out in public because to do otherwise was dangerous.

What the Taliban did was abrogate the most fundamental rights for women. They denied them education, for they knew learning is a dangerous thing; they denied them wages and, of course, property, and essentially made them slaves; and they denied them any semblance of equal citizenship and respect as individuals. In effect, these actions said: men rule, women obey--or else--and they did it in the name of religion.

Actions such as this--and even far less extreme actions that illustrate the idea that men rule and women are the ruled--are why the most widespread organizing by women worldwide since the early 1990s and continuing to today is around the violence against women issue. It is also the issue getting the most media attention here and abroad.

Just a few days ago in the New York Times, there was a headline in Section A: "Pakistan Begins Inquiry Into Deaths of 5 Women Amid Dispute Over Honor Killings." Three young women were stoned, shot and buried alive because they dared to choose the men they wanted to marry rather than let their families choose for them. This dishonored the families--the men in the family. Sadly, two older women who tried to defend the young women suffered the same fate--death.

Courageous women in Pakistan who had formed a human rights group called on a French human rights group for help and for international publicity.

The women are dead but the idea of human rights and such severe abrogations of human rights lives on.

Pakistan is not alone, not unique in this honor killings problem. It, and lesser manifestations of violence against women, are a worldwide problem. This business of maintaining your honor by killing or by other forms of violence is a total denial of human rights. No wonder women are organizing around this issue at local and national and international levels.

But to stop violence you have to stop the reasoning behind the violence. We ought to be past the time when we think that some people are born to rule and others to be ruled. The idea that one's honor depends on whether your rule is respected and obeyed is just plain wrong. One's honor, we progressives know, is whether you are a decent citizen, a responsible citizen who cares about others and treats them as one would like to be treated.

That means that here at home you take politics seriously, that at a minimum you vote, that you organize around the issues and around candidates, and if you are a candidate for president of the United States, you think long and hard about your vice-president for he or she may have to take the awesome responsibility of being president.

Thank you.