

Note: This op-ed was featured on Election Day on National Public Radio's "Where We Live" show, along with a lengthy interview with PCSW Executive Director Teresa Younger.

The White House Girls -- So Goes the Nation? By Teresa C. Younger

One of the most significant decisions the next president will make is to appoint at least one – and as many as three -- new justices to the Supreme Court. When he does, he should think not of politics or popular opinion, but of his own daughters. Their health and happiness hang in the balance.

If you take at random a small group of American girls and study the span of their lives against the backdrop of issues that affect women as a whole, you can make certain predictions with some confidence. From birth to death, women are subject to various experiences depending on factors both within -- and outside -- their control. Some are bound to live in poverty, get cancer and become divorced, while others will have fulfilling careers, good health and enduring marriages. At the heart of how these experiences turn out sits the U.S. Constitution.

It's no secret that the role of women in this election cycle has been a significant one, and regardless of who wins, the White House will be populated by more girls growing up within its walls than at any time since John Tyler raised his four young girls there in the early 1840s. Until now, the candidates' collective nine daughters have been little more than an amusing diversion from the rancor of the campaigns. But it's important to ask what will become of them as they grow up in a country deeply affected by the decisions their father (or his opponent) has made. What lies in store for this small group – what demographers would call a “cohort”? How accurately do the nine daughters -- at least four of them young enough to become adolescents or legal adults during the next four years – reflect the 51 percent of the American public that is female?

In ascending order of age, we have: Sasha Obama and Piper Palin, both 7 years old; Malia Obama, 10; Willow Palin, 14; Bridget McCain and Bristol Palin, both 17; Meghan McCain, 24; Ashley Biden, 27; and McCain's estranged daughter Sidney, 44. Together they span 37 years in age, and reflect something of the country's racial diversity, ideology and geography.

Now, in any truly random sampling, one must expect economic variations, and here's where our cohort skews the experiment. Because of their financial status, which ranges from upper middle class comfort to extreme wealth, it's unlikely any of the White House daughters will end up living in poverty the way 21 million other American women do. This trend worsens over time; 70 percent of our nation's elderly poor are women, according to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

In the career arena, our cohort is predicted to fare better than most. Because of their privilege and role modeling, the White House girls have the freedom to pursue whatever career or endeavor they like, whether or not it pays a living wage. Those who choose to work, however, will undoubtedly feel at least some of the anxiety all working women feel when trying to balance a career, home and personal time.

What about education? It's unlikely the female progeny of Obama, McCain, Biden or Palin will graduate from college with the kind of debt currently pushing so many new graduates farther back on their road to asset-building. And they're already ahead of the curve in that they're assured a place in college – if they choose to go.

And then there is sexual harassment, faced every day by women across the socio-economic spectrum. Being on the national stage (through no choice of their own), these nine girls and young women have already experienced comments about their clothing, hair and bodies. And it can get much worse: because domestic violence knows no economic or class bounds, at least three of the White House girls are at serious risk for abuse at some point in their lives. One can only hope the next president will not wait until this happens to his own daughter before he signs into law legislation to restore funding for shelters and toughen penalties for battering.

What about access to healthcare? Depending on which way the Supreme Court tilts, the girls may see the end of their complete reproductive rights – including contraception, pregnancy termination and fertility treatments. One of the nine daughters is already pregnant out of wedlock, putting her squarely with her peers across the country; three out of nine American girls will become pregnant in their teens, according to the Centers for Disease Control. While this particular daughter is bound to get the healthcare, financial help and moral support she needs, many others in her shoes will not. Will those who become pregnant as the result of a rape be able to count on the emergency contraception pill known as “Plan B” under the next Supreme Court?

According to the American Cancer Society, an astonishing eight of the nine daughters in our cohort already have at least one of the indicators for breast cancer. And yet, a new study reported this week in The New York Times says that in many parts of the country, women pay up to 40 percent more than men do for the same medical insurance. This disparity, combined with the fact that the tanking economy is stripping more and more women of health insurance, is pushing many women into bankruptcy. And while that financial safety net will protect the White House girls, their fathers would do well to imagine a nation full of other men's daughters suffering that fate.

Throughout their lives, the young women of the White House will face discrimination based solely on their gender. Gay women often face an additional stigma, and since one of these nine girls or young women is a lesbian (whether or not she knows it yet), she'll experience that discrimination first-hand. Unless she lives in Massachusetts, California or Connecticut, she won't be allowed to marry her partner any time soon.

Together, our White House cohort represents a combined 137 years of womanhood. They might be shocked to learn that 137 years ago, at the start of the Civil War in 1861, women could not vote, go to school with boys or play sports. Thanks to the many equal education provisions Title IX brought in 1972, the next president's daughters may study any subject they like and play any sport they wish. Despite growing up assured they could take their rightful place alongside boys on the playing field, however, the girls shouldn't assume it's a level one: according to the U.S. Department of Education, women's sports get less than one-third of I-A division universities' athletics budgets. And while girls are graduating from college at a faster rate than boys, women still make up only 25 percent of the workforce in careers in science, engineering, technology and math.

So while it's true we've made much progress in the issues affecting the span of a woman's life, far too much remains to be done. Let's hope when our next president makes that critical first appointment to the Supreme Court, he looks not to his (mostly) male advisors, but deep into his own daughter's eyes. There, he will find both the best and the worst of what awaits more than half the people he has promised to serve.

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