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**Not Their Mother’s Candidate**by Susan Faludi, the author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies at Bowdoin College.

If, as we’ve all now heard, “there’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other,” then a room on the Upper East Side of Manhattan has long been a piece of feminist heaven. It’s the room that Gloria Steinem provided for years in her apartment as a residence for young women she mentored and encouraged and learned from.

Perhaps no feminist of her time has done more than Ms. Steinem to pass the torch, to bridge the divide between young and old activist women. Whether you considered the feminist generation gap to be a fissure or a canyon, one thing was clear: The last person who would ever fall into it was Gloria Steinem.

Then she did. Or rather was pushed. Pressed by Bill Maher, who had persistently tried to provoke an old-lady outburst about girls-these-days, Ms. Steinem said of the young women backing Bernie Sanders: “When you’re young, you’re thinking: ‘Where are the boys? The boys are with Bernie.’” Never mind that fewer than two minutes earlier she’d asserted, “I find the young women very, very activist, and they’re way, way more feminist.”

Fueled by the force multiplier of Madeleine Albright’s “special place in hell” quote the next day, the feminist family feud now threatens to engulf a presidential campaign. Women under 30 in New Hampshire went for Mr. Sanders 4:1, while women 65 and older sided nearly 2:1 with Hillary Clinton.

It felt like a very 21st-century feminist battle: Modern idealistic individualism trouncing faded movement solidarity. In truth, the generational grudge match has been battering women’s prospects for a long time, ever since women won the vote in 1920.

In the 19th century, virtually every women’s campaign — from abolition to temperance to social reform to suffrage — was cast as a mother-daughter compact, a movement of political “mothers” protecting their “daughters” from male predation and passing down moral power.

That alliance was disrupted in the 1920s with a consumer-driven youth revolt against the prudish Victorian matriarch and a celebration of a motherless girl culture of flapper dance-a-thons, petting parties and gin fests. The powerful new forces of Hollywood, national advertising, automobiles and urban jobs enlisted young women into a commercial version of emancipation, which substituted individual liberation for collective political authority and which promised them the “freedom” to shop, to display their bodies and to smoke, to drink and drive with the boys — and throw it all in the face of their oppressive mothers.

Since then, successive waves of feminists have pursued two emancipations simultaneously. Liberation from the patriarchy has also meant dethroning their mothers. In 1922, The New York Times enthused that a flapper girl “takes a man’s point of view as her mother never could.”

That story line resurged with every revival. The second-wave feminist poet Adrienne Rich observed that her cohort so often seemed stricken with “matrophobia.” Third wavers hoisted the we’re-not-our-uptight-mothers banner, in the mistaken impression that their female elders had been “anti-sex,” and in 2008 frequently declared their aversion to Hillary Clinton by saying she “reminds me of my mother.”

Commercialism incited the original generational breakdown. The 2016 schism is expressing itself on the campaign trail. But some tenets remain the same. The insistence of older women that their daughters not be subjugated by men is interpreted as its own subjugation. The desire of young women for independence of thought recoils at older women’s instructions that their independent thoughts be loyal.

As young women put it in outraged commentary inspired by the Steinem-Albright flap, their feminist elders were “belittling and talking down to us.” In one such Facebook eruption, that theme — “We no longer need these old school feminists commenting on our behalf” — was intercut with mean-spirited snipes at Ms. Steinem’s and Ms. Albright’s advancing years: “it’s clear that senility has set in to her mind,” “past her best before date…and has been for 30 years. Useless cow,” “you vile, withered, bitter old irrelevance.” As one queasy commenter eventually posted, “Gentle observation: this thread became a witch burning very quickly.”

It’s no wonder young women, and many others, flock to Senator Sanders. He’s a compelling candidate with a necessary message. For some young women there’s an added incentive. It’s not that he’s where the boys are; he’s where the mothers aren’t. By supporting Mr. Sanders, a young Democratic woman can also demonstrate she’s thinking for herself in the voting booth, not marching in gendered lock step.

Well-intentioned women on both sides of the generational divide harbor their illusions about the other. Older feminists too often think that because they fought the “big” war, they set the terms of battle for all time.

Too many younger feminists buy into the canard that second-wave feminism was exclusively a white, bourgeois affair, unconcerned with race and class. And both sides can be blind to the special traps that the culture sets for their demographic counterparts.

Younger feminists don’t fully understand how ageism can be sexist or why female elders might feel compelled to present a cautious and controlled persona on the public stage. Take, for example, the avuncular affability Mr. Sanders displays. A similar approach would backfire on any woman seeking real authority.

At the same time, the older generation doesn’t always comprehend what feminism may mean to their juniors, who have different burdens and concerns and are trying to fight a new war, not the old one.

However young women pick their candidates these days, as my students faithfully remind me, their choices are guided by serious convictions and their feminism is shaped by experiences with systems of power that are murkier than the ones their elders confronted.

“Today feminism is more about personal identity,” Ann Friedman wrote last week for New York magazine’s The Cut. “There are points of collective action, but mostly it’s a belief system that we adhere to individually, and in highly individualized ways.” There’s nothing wrong with expressing your individuality (unless it falls into the flapper trap of 1920s commercial faux-liberation), nor with being captivated by the idealism of Bernie’s “revolution” (until it becomes quixotic).

But just as their elders should recognize the merits of younger women’s views, young voters should understand that older feminists’ concerns come from a place more genuine than millennial bashing. It’s not a fight between young and fresh idealism and weary pragmatism. Older feminists, who’ve witnessed a revolution or two, recall how cold and dark the night can be when the uprising implodes.

Knowing that, more seasoned voters may rightly consider a romantic Democratic insurrection the height of elitist privilege when what’s at stake are the lives of underprivileged women of all ages and races, women who will be the prime victims when social welfare programs are laid waste, Roe v. Wade overturned, Social Security gutted, and national health care shredded by whoever beats Mr. Sanders in November.

In the long run, the feminist victory that Hillary Clinton needs to emphasize is not breaking an individualistic glass ceiling so we can finally send a woman to the Oval Office. It’s defending the fragile rights of millions of women, the rights for which feminism fought so hard. That’s what hangs in the balance, and what makes the current shouting match so unfortunate. That the Democratic agenda, so singularly important to women, could be scuttled by a slugfest between generations of like-minded women is a tragedy we can’t afford.

