



**Bio:** Cecile Richards is an American pro-choice activist who served as the president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and president of the Planned Parenthood Action Fund from 2006 to 2018.

Before joining Planned Parenthood, Ms. Richards served as deputy chief of staff for House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi. In 2004, she founded and served as president of America Votes, a coalition of 42 national grassroots organizations working to maximize registration, education, and voter participation. Ms. Richards began her career organizing low-wage workers in the hotel, health care, and janitorial industries throughout California, Louisiana, and Texas. The daughter of former Texas Governor Ann Richards, Ms. Richards was raised in a family committed to social justice and public service. Ms. Richards is a frequent speaker and commentator on issues related to women’s rights, reproductive health, and sex education, and is a regular contributor to The Huffington Post. She currently serves on the board of the Ford Foundation.

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An Interview with Cecile Richards

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Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Hallie Meisler and Mady Winkler, Class of 2020

Edited by Patricia Amarilla

**Hallie Meisler (HM) & Madelyn Winkler (MW): What was your understanding of being a woman and your impressions of the women in your life growing up?**

**Cecile Richards:** I grew up in Texas, you may know, and definitely when I was growing up, I don’t think women were expected to do much of anything. There weren’t a lot of role models, there weren’t a lot of examples. In fact, my own mother was a housewife in Dallas and she raised four kids and did all the sort of things that were expected of her. She used to say, “if it was in the glossy magazines,” she was doing it: putting on the perfect dinner party, the perfect birthday for the kids. It wasn’t until much later that she ran for office and things changed when the women’s movement started. So I don’t think I had really high expectations and it wasn’t until much later when we had already moved to Austin, that a woman named Sissy Farenthold ran for governor of Texas. She was seen to be just such a firebrand and really radical, just because the whole idea that a woman would run for governor was almost unthinkable. One of the reasons I’m such a big fan of Title IX, was that when I was growing up, we didn’t even have full court basketball for girls. I played basketball, but they thought we could only run halfway down the court and then we had to pass the ball because we would “exhaust ourselves.” So, I think so many things have changed and

that to me, was one of the most exciting things that I got to work on in college: when Title IX was passed, finally getting educational equity, and therefore also sports equity for young women. I could have really used that when I was growing up in Texas.

**HM & MW: After being so close to women in politics, including your mother's gubernatorial campaign and your work with Nancy Pelosi, what have you learned about women's leadership specifically in the political sphere?**

**CR:** Well, there are so many things, and of course women aren't a monolith as we know. But I do think, in the most general sense, women always have to work harder to get the job they got. So most of them, when they get there, they're not wasting time, they came to office to do something. And, certainly with my mother, just to take her as an example, because she was eventually elected governor. I think some folks think, "oh my gosh, everyone must have been so excited about this idea and thrilled." But in fact, she had to beat two men in the Democratic primary just to be the nominee and of course barely beat the guy who was running against her. There were so many things about that race that were so instructive; she was a divorced woman, she was a liberal, she was a recovering alcoholic. I mean, there were all kinds of things that really could have been disqualifying, and my mom just ran anyway. But it made for very, very personal attacks on her and she had to be really tough, and as her kids, you had to be really tough. I see the same thing happening with Nancy [Pelosi] now, because now that the Democrats have taken back the house, she's in line to potentially become Speaker of the House again. Without a doubt, she is the most qualified person I've ever worked for, she works harder, she knows how to count votes. She is such an extraordinary leader and yet, as the only woman leader in Congress, because of course, all the other rest of them are men, she's under constant attack, particularly by the opposing party. The Republican Party has really made her sort of enemy number one, I think in large part because she is so effective. It has been discouraging to see, even in Nancy's case, that no matter how hard she works, how successful she is, and obviously with the Democrats winning so many seats back in the house this year, if a man had done that, he would be getting coronated, it would be extraordinary. But instead, she gets vilified in the press and so the double standard is alive and well. I guess I hate to say it, that's probably one of the things I learned about running for office.

**HM & MW: Do you think being a mother has influenced your political leadership style, especially having three young kids in your early organizing days?**

**CR:** I think being a parent just changes everything. I was actually just talking to a friend who just had a baby and somehow the world just has a different perspective. That was my experience. I think for a lot of women, you have to solve problems constantly. You've got to figure out how to do more things than you could possibly do in a day. Whether it's making sure someone's picking up the kids from school, finishing the job you've got to do, washing the laundry at night. All the myriad things that women are expected to do, because let's face it, we have an economy that was

built by men, for men. It's very hard to get affordable childcare. And so I think having now raised three kids, it makes me really appreciate what women go through. It was wonderful to see Senator Tammy Duckworth give birth, and [she] was the first senator to actually bring her baby on the floor of the United States Senate, and you would've thought the world was coming to an end. Yet I think for every woman, it's just like, how many years did they have to wait to see that? So to me, it's very exciting to see people now recognizing that mothers can be more than mothers. They can be mothers, and they can be pilots, they can be senators, and they can be the biggest and most important tennis star in the world, and they can be president. That to me is a really big change. I think frankly, politics is healthier for it, for having people who have been mothers. When we were having the whole debate over the Affordable Care Act, there was literally a debate about whether or not insurance plans should need to cover maternity benefits. And, a senator from Arizona said he didn't think that they should be required because *he* was never going to need them, which was such an obvious point. But, Senator Debbie Stabenow from Michigan turned right around and said, "well, I bet your mother needed them." So that to me is the difference of having women who can actually think about the policies we're making, and even the debate we're having. How does it look different if you're a woman, if you've been a mother, if you've been a parent? And that's really healthy.

**HM & MW: In your case study in *Junctures in Women's Leadership: Social Movements*<sup>1</sup>, you mentioned the hostile government that was surrounding Planned Parenthood during the time that you took over as president. Did you have any hesitations about taking the job during the Bush administration, and what made you decide to take it?**

**CR:** I definitely had no hesitations. In fact, like a lot of women, I think my reaction when I got called to possibly interview for the job was, "wow, me?" I think in fact my reaction was much more, "I don't know if I can do that, I don't know if I have the skills." I wasn't afraid of getting into the fray, but I doubted my own abilities. So that's one of the things I feel like I learned, is that we can do so much more than we ever know we can, if folks give us a chance. But those years were really important, the years we had to defend Planned Parenthood. And then of course it also gave me perspective, because once we did have a president who was supportive of women's health, when President Obama came in, I realized we couldn't waste a moment, we had to do everything we could and it led to the most important achievements we've had. Certainly in the 12 years that I was at Planned Parenthood, getting birth control covered for all people in insurance plans at no cost was revolutionary. So I'm grateful for those years where things were adverse, and maybe sometimes the ball rolls downhill a bit, you have to then use every chance you can. It was fascinating to be working with President Obama's administration when Kathleen Sebelius was the Secretary of Health and Human Services, someone who had defended Planned Parenthood in Kansas, who understood women's health and the progress we were able to make. It was astounding, it really was. Those were a tough couple of years, to start all over again.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary K. Trigg and Alison R. Bernstein, eds., *Junctures in Women's Leadership: Social Movements*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

**HM & MW: When you became president of Planned Parenthood, were you looking to continue the previous work of the organization and past presidents or did you try to make the organization your own and adapt it to a new political climate? And if you did, how did you do that?**

**CR:** When I came in, one of the reasons that they interviewed me was that Planned Parenthood is the expert on reproductive healthcare. We do the clinical trials on almost every new form of birth control that's invented. We really set the standards on reproductive healthcare, but increasingly the frustration of our doctors and our clinicians was that they couldn't actually provide the care because of political interventions. And when I was interviewed, it was with that thought that we needed to really beef up our movement again and recognize that in our heart, that is really where Planned Parenthood started, to be at the forefront of pushing forward for reproductive healthcare and rights. So for me, that was just a dream come true and we did change some things. We continued to invest in and do the absolute best in medical services and care, and I'm so proud of that. In fact, we just did the FDA trials here in New Jersey and in Texas on a new self-injectable birth control that lasts for three months and it's highly effective. So we are really, really proud that we're always on the leading edge of reproductive care. But then we invested in building a movement as well, and we invested in young people, we invested in technology, and invested in doing the rough and tumble of advocacy. I'm so proud that we went from three million supporters to now more than twelve million and a lot of more young people, young women, young men, folks who had never been involved in an organization before. That to me is one of the many reasons we were able to protect ourselves when the political winds changed in Washington.

**HM & MW: As a leader, where do you see the benefit in taking meetings with people who fundamentally disagree with you and who are actively working against your agenda? How do you hold your composure? What is your ultimate goal in talking to people that disagree with your work?**

**CR:** I think the most important thing we could do is, and I learned this over the 12 years at Planned Parenthood, is always put the women and the patients at the center of everything we do. And I felt that when I had to testify before Congress, I was there in part to represent the millions of patients at Planned Parenthood who were never going to get a chance to testify before Congress. The more I could lift up their experiences and their story, people don't do things for your reasons. They do things for their reasons and I felt like talking about the women, and one woman in particular I talked about in Dallas, in whom we detected breast cancer, we helped make sure she got treatment and then she got well. If there's any bit of human empathy for people to begin to understand and relate to what it's like to be a young person and not have any idea about sex education, that to me, is the most important thing. The one specific meeting [I had] with Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner; I'll take any meeting if I can actually talk about what Planned Parenthood does. To me, it was so important that they understood they were thinking of this in political terms and I just felt like we needed to think about it in human terms. What about the millions of people that would lose access to affordable, preventive health care if they were to actually make this political move? And

I'm not saying it always works, but I think that's the most important thing, trying to create a human connection with people and recognize the two and a half billion [should this be million?] patients that come into Planned Parenthood's doors every year. They don't come to make a political statement, they're coming because they need access to affordable healthcare and that's what Planned Parenthood represents for them.

**HM & MW: In terms of addressing the importance of women's health, how do you recommend young people and students like us open up that dialogue with people who may not agree with the women's health agenda?**

**CR:** One of the things we started doing in Planned Parenthood is investing in young people, giving them training as speakers, as public speakers, as advocates, and then bringing them to Congress and bringing it to the legislatures. And I will tell you, I don't care how smart a lobbyist is or may be someone who knows everything about reproductive healthcare, but when a teenager or a young person comes to advocate to a member of Congress, they almost always see them. So that's one of the things, recognize your power because they very seldom get to talk to young people about what's going on in their lives. I think it'll give you enormous skills. Remember that they need you just as much as you need them, so don't discount yourself. Another thing is, it's really important to quit labeling and judging folks that really come to people in a conversation from a spirit of empathy. One of the things we learned at Planned Parenthood a few years ago was that the whole pro-choice/pro-life, this bifurcation or binary description of something that's actually a very complicated, very personal issue, can't be reduced to labels. If you don't try to label someone, but you're actually just trying to have an honest conversation, an open conversation, one of the things that is important to say to them is that abortion is a very personal topic. That sometimes just lets people relax because they realize you're not trying to paint them in a corner. I think really having the fundamental conversation about a pregnant person, who's best to make decisions about that pregnancy? The person, or a politician, or a judge? You may not change people's mind, but that is fundamentally what we're talking about. Someone's pregnant, no matter what the situation is, they're almost always in a better position to make that decision. One of the things I'm proud of at Planned Parenthood is that we counsel women every day, what are their options? What do they want? What do they need to know? And women can make the best decision for themselves.

**HM & MW: What are your thoughts on the midterm elections [November 2019?] and where do we go from here?**

**CR:** Well, one of the things that's hard is that in a midterm election, just not nearly as many people vote because there's less conversation about it and of course, we don't make it easy for people to vote. Now, the interesting thing is in these last midterm elections, there was highest voter turnout ever, so that's getting better. But I come from the state of Texas and I spent time with Stacey Abrams in Georgia, I was campaigning in Florida. There are states where people simply are disenfranchised, and to me, one of the things coming out of this midterm is we have to make voting a value in this country again. We need a federal holiday for Election Day. There are so many things

we need to do, because it shouldn't be different if you live in New Jersey or if you live in Texas. Voting should be simple and we should encourage people to do it, in particularly young people because as we know, if young people get to vote once and then twice, they become lifetime voters. So that's one reaction, just how horrified I am that there are people whose votes didn't count and that wasn't unintentional. We have elected officials who were trying to suppress votes and that's unconscionable and it's undemocratic. I think certainly the other is these big state races: Beto O'Rourke who was running in Texas, Stacey Abrams in Georgia, Andrew Gillum, to name three people that I was really supportive of. They ran very, very close races, I wish they had won. We have to do a lot in this country to talk about race because I think that that was obviously a theme in these elections. I think for all of us, for white women, when you look at how progressive women of color are and particularly black women are, it's really important that we have conversations with our sisters about why voting matters and why everyone matters. I think women can do more and they are still the most progressive voting bloc in the country, but we can do more. But frankly it made me very optimistic about 2020, and particularly because of what I saw with women even just putting aside the candidates, you know, historic numbers of candidates and victories, women were fueling everything. The phone banks, I was phone banking, block walking, with volunteers everywhere. They were largely women and not just young women, but it was intergenerational. I think women are the most important and powerful political force in this country now and I just hope that we can do more to let them know that and support them in their work.

**HM & MW: How do you stay motivated to keep fighting and how might you encourage young progressives to stay motivated when the political climate may be discouraging?**

**CR:** I talked about Planned Parenthood specifically because we've been in the fight just to preserve our health centers. I thought about that a lot because we never had the votes to win and yet we just had to keep going and we had to encourage people to keep going. One of the ways I kept going and talking to other staff and our volunteers that I just figured out, I did the math, every single day we stayed open and blocked the defunding, more than 8,000 people got affordable healthcare, when many of them otherwise wouldn't. So to me, I couldn't think of what's going to happen in a year, but I can think every single day, just get up and just keep them open. And of course we ended up winning that, we got the votes and we won it, and our doors are still open. Part of that is we just have to tell that story, people have to learn that not giving up is the only way you ever win. I think the second part of this is, people asked this question a lot before the midterms: what can I do? And I said, well, if you're going to do anything, go volunteer for a candidate, go volunteer for somebody who's running for office. I remember making a speech in Manhattan and I said, look, quit your job and go work for Stacey Abrams in Georgia, she's the most important, exciting woman running. I get a text about two weeks later, this woman said, "I was in the audience. I heard you. I quit my job and I'm moving to Atlanta to be her deputy digital director." So I feel we can never underestimate how much people are just looking for an opportunity, and that to me is the real obligation we all have now. And it doesn't have to be a perfect opportunity, just do more than you're doing now, take a chance, do something that seems risky, and if you do, you might be on the side of something really exciting. And look at all of these races that women won. One other thing is you'll meet amazing people, you will meet people who will keep you in this work, and that to me is, at the end of the day, probably the most important part of it.

**HM & MW: What advice can you give to young women and just women in general who are seeking leadership roles in today's society?**

**CR:** First I think it's never been a better time to be a young woman, I feel like the sky's the limit. We've just seen record numbers of women running, of doing things that people never said they could. So the most important thing is don't wait to be asked, don't wait to get permission, just do it. Whatever it is you're thinking about doing, just do it because it's the only life you have. And that to me is what's most exciting about what I'm seeing now, whether it's running for office, starting your own organization, volunteering, quitting your job and doing something crazy like working on a campaign, or doing something that just makes your heart sing. That to me is the most important thing about leadership. The other piece and what I'm interested in now is, I feel like there was this myth or this sort of urban legend that women don't support other women, we've got to make it come to an end. The other thing you can do is, not only do things for yourself, but when you see another woman who wants to be a leader, support her and she will never forget it, because there's more than enough to go around. This is to me, not a time of scarcity, this is a time of abundance, of opportunity for women. The more that we stick together and support each other, that's where we're going to really make change and it's going to feel so much better doing it.

**Sasha Taner: Do have any kind of anecdote or illustration of somebody who you have been mentored by?**

**CR:** I think that the whole idea of mentorship is important. I know for me, I never had anyone just pick me and say, "hey, stick with me." But in every single job I had, I looked for somebody who could teach me something, and almost always it was a woman. I think we have to seek out those opportunities, and also not be afraid to say if something doesn't work out, or go do something else. I am struck by, still, and this is extraordinary, I was the president of Planned Parenthood, women knew who I was. More often than not, folks who asked me for a letter of recommendation or to see them for coffee or all these other things, were men. I made a commitment after that, which is I was actually going to seek out women who wanted either mentorship, or just wanted to have a conversation, if they wanted to talk about what they're going to do next. That's what I do now, because I found that left to our own devices, women don't usually raise their hand and say, "Hey, could you help me?" My mom, who was just a raving feminist, just got even more radical the older she got. The whole key to everything was supporting women, and right before she died, she started the girls school in Texas. It's a public girl's school in Austin called the Ann Richards School for young women leaders. I just went and spoke there, and these were young girls starting in sixth grade and they're going through senior year in high school and they finally, it took several years, but they now have the full cohort. There are like 800 girls, it's the lottery, it's unbelievable. It's just an incredible place, all the girls get into college, and it's the most diverse student body I've ever seen. I said to the principal, "I want to mentor these girls because they are at that moment in their life in which they could do anything but they just don't know what's next." I think that would be a really exciting thing too. I was thinking about young women I knew who were in college, they

should be mentors for these girls as well because you just can't start too early and I think that's one of the things I've learned from organizing, and frankly just even being an activist in Texas is starting early. Those experiences, standing up to authority, challenging something someone said, speaking up for yourself in class, those are things if you do them when you're young, you never forget it.