

What Women Really Think of Men

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At the kickoff for his postelection victory lap in Cincinnati this month, Donald J. Trump bluntly told men, "Hate to tell you," but women, "generally speaking, they're better than you are."

As a feminist, I disagree. It does women, and society, no favors to grouse about female superiority as a way to let men off the hook. When society writes off men as irredeemable, we all lose.

Some 53 percent of white women voters — although thanks to minority women, not a majority of all women — rejected Hillary Clinton's plea to break the glass ceiling and voted for Mr. Trump instead. I've talked to some of these women. They don't think much of men, either.

"Trump is a narcissist," a middle-aged white woman in East Stroudsburg, Pa., told me in the early evening on Election Day. "I know," she added, "because my husband is one, too." She said she disliked both candidates, but she voted for Mr. Trump.

As the country prepares to revert to white male rule, our common condition for all but eight of the last 240 years, we should think harder about why we assume so little of men, including ones we may be married to. Too many men don't prove those expectations wrong, and are rewarded anyway with prizes like the presidency.

The persistence of sexism wasn't usually something the Trump supporters I've met liked to acknowledge. But last summer, a fervent Trump fan I interviewed in Eastlake, Ohio — Patti Hall, 74, a retired hairdresser who wore a pink bow in her hair — bluntly declared that men didn't want women in charge. "I'll grant you that," she said, grinning. "They don't want a woman in as president!" She laughed at my raised eyebrows. "Now, you know that's true!"

We both looked at the world and saw men profoundly threatened by rising female power, but to Ms. Hall, this was a fixed truth, and all women could do was roll our eyes about it.

Not long after Mr. Trump was caught bragging about how fame afforded him unlimited genital grabbing opportunities, the photographer Chris Arnade recalled, a woman in his hometown, Dade City, Fla., shrugged it off: "Oh, men, you've got to learn how to fight them off. They're crazy. That's men!"

So what if Mr. Trump is known to have crassly assessed women based solely on whether he, Mr. Trump, found them attractive, or that he has shamed women for breast-feeding or gaining weight? That's men. That's your husband, your father, your brother, your son.

"I cherish women," Mr. Trump has said. But this is not the same as recognizing women's equal humanity. As Ruth Bader Ginsburg, quoting a California judicial opinion, told the Supreme Court in 1971, "the pedestal upon which women have been placed has all too often, upon closer inspection, been revealed as a cage." When we declare that men will always be brutes and women can only shrug from on high, we engage in what President George W. Bush once called the soft bigotry of low expectations.

Feminists' critique of male power has long been caricatured as hatred of men. But it is feminists whose fight is motivated by the belief that men can be better, if we can make clear that they, too, benefit from a safer, more equal and more just world. We have little choice but to try — men still control so much, and besides, many of us love them.

Our intimate lives, where we are the most vulnerable and the least rational, are the hardest to reconcile with politics. And the very idea that men and women can and should be equal partners is only a generation or two old. Most of us, even now, are just making it up as we go along.

In 1996, Gloria Steinem offered a theory about why so many people hated Hillary Clinton: "She and the president are presenting, at a very high, visible level, a new paradigm of a male-female relationship. And that is very much resented." Mrs. Clinton was pilloried for her ostensibly traditional choice to stay with her unfaithful husband. It would come back to haunt her. This year, renewed attention to accusations against Bill Clinton did nothing to dispel the notion that all men are pigs, effectively defusing the many accusations against Mr. Trump. They're crazy. That's men.

Or as Melania Trump put it in an interview after the "Access Hollywood" video surfaced: "Sometimes I say I have two boys at home — I have my young son and I have my husband. But I know how some men talk, and that's how I saw it."

The Trump marriage offers some pretty basic math on what women can expect from men. In 2005, months into his third marriage, Mr. Trump acknowledged that in some quarters, marriage had changed. "There's a lot of women out there that demand that the husband act like the wife, and you know, there's a lot of husbands that listen to that," he said in a radio interview. Mr. Trump, he made clear, was not one of those husbands. "I mean, I won't do anything to take care of them," he said of his future offspring. "I'll supply funds and she'll take care of the kids. It's not like I'm gonna be walking the kids down Central Park."

The Trumps' arrangement has the benefit of bald simplicity, and Mr. Trump is not alone in extolling it. People without a college degree, from whom the president-elect saw strong support, were in a 2013 Pew survey nearly twice as likely as the college-educated to say it was better for a marriage if a husband made more money than the wife. Unfortunately for those ideals, this is the demographic for whom the gender pay gap has narrowed most.

If white women of all education levels were more susceptible to Mr. Trump's nostalgic, macho transactionalism, perhaps it was because they are adjacent to the men who have traditionally enjoyed the most resources and power in society, and who either believe they have lost it or fear losing it.

By contrast, black women, who overwhelmingly voted for Mrs. Clinton, were 14 percentage points more likely than white women to see themselves as leaders — and 23 points more likely to be the primary wage earners at home, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll in September. These women's lives, whether by necessity or choice, already belie the fiction that a man's job is to provide and not much else.

Mr. Trump also won married women, for whom it may cost more to challenge the men in their lives. I spoke to a 50-year-old newspaper carrier in Texas, a Clinton voter, who explained to me why she believed her mother and other white women went for Mr. Trump. "Here comes Hillary, and she's a strong woman and it makes a lot of men mad, and it makes a lot of women uncomfortable, and they want to keep peace in their homes."

But the highest-placed public testament to the notion that even powerful men are capable of seeing women as partners and taking joy in parenting — not to mention getting this far without being accused of groping a woman, or several, against her will — is still in the White House. Barack Obama, who identifies as a feminist, even recently reflected on his own shortcomings as a husband at home: "I can look back now and see that, while I helped out, it was usually on my schedule and on my terms. The burden disproportionately and unfairly fell on Michelle." Men taking responsibility, even retrospectively, is what it's going to take for us to believe another world is possible, one in which we don't romanticize female superiority to let men off the hook.

As a woman marrying a man next year, I have to believe that such a world could exist. I don't think either of us is better or worse than the other because of our genders; we're just two people who hope we can be better, together. I know I'm lucky. If I thought all men were like Mr. Trump, or would be if they had the chance, who knows what I would do.