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STRONG WOMEN HANDLE IT

*Conservative women, gender,
power and identity in the context
of the Kavanaugh hearings*



INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, a series of events placed sexual assault at the forefront of national discourse. In 2016, Donald Trump, a man who has repeatedly demeaned and mistreated women and who has been accused of sexual assault by multiple women, won a majority of white women’s votes. The subsequent Women’s March on Washington, the hope and anger of the #MeToo movement and the historic number of women candidates running for (and winning) elected office in 2018 makes clear many women’s adamant rejection of Trumpism. And yet, the Brett Kavanaugh Senate confirmation hearings were a sobering reminder of unresolved challenges, as some conservative women defended the installation of an extreme conservative, anti-choice Justice dogged by credible accusations of sexual assault.

On behalf of GALvanize USA, the Topos Partnership conducted research¹ to understand how and why conservative-leaning women respond to dog whistles for hostile sexism—using the Ford-Kavanaugh event as a window into how they think about gender equity, power, and their own identity. We listened to a politically influential population—non-college-educated white women who live in conservative locales. Their voices, both in articulating a defense of men and family as well as empowering themselves and their daughters, help us understand the opportunities for reaching them

and the work that needs to be done to win their support for policy agendas that advance progress for all.

It is not an attempt to deconstruct or critique a conservative discourse on feminism. It is about articulating the issue as non-college-educated conservative and moderate women see it.

The women we spoke with—conservative and moderate, often Christian, who live in conservative-leaning areas, and who identify themselves profoundly as mothers, wives and daughters—articulate a number of feminist views:

¹ This research is based on ethnographic interviews conducted by anthropologists with over 40 women from Republican-leaning communities around the country, including in North and South Carolina, Arizona, Oregon, Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Kentucky. These women self-identify as conservative or moderate—though most of them are not particularly political or partisan. They are white, and most have not attended a 4-year college. All but two are registered to vote and one additional interviewee declined to answer that question.



- Nearly all see expanding social and economic opportunities for women as a positive change.
- They want their daughters and granddaughters to be strong and assertive and they want their sons to be nurturing and respectful.
- They expect and applaud the way that men are taking more responsibility for household matters, and how they have become more accepting of equal partnerships with their wives and girlfriends.
- These women expect their voices to be heard and respected.
- They regard themselves as strong, self-reliant women.

They are well aware of the problems of male violence and abuse of power. In fact, many have direct experience of this. While they may be tolerant of misbehaviors such as catcalling and general male chauvinism, they unanimously view violent sexual assault, abuse and male violence as unacceptable and intolerable. They believe it is a good thing that women are less afraid to speak up about assault and abuse, and most see the #MeToo movement as a positive step in that regard.

There is a solid foundation of pro-woman views on which to build.

Yet the image and the words of Dr. Ford, presenting her testimony in the Senate, which so moved and galvanized liberals and feminists, utterly failed to rally these women to her side. On the contrary, they rallied to the side of Judge Kavanaugh and supported his elevation to the highest court. How can we explain what seems to be a contradiction of beliefs?

The challenge to overcome with conservative, working-class white women is not what many might think. These are not submissive women who believe a woman's place is in the kitchen.

Rather, they see a world where each individual has to navigate her or his own journey and overcome life's obstacles through strength of character and will. They are less likely to consider or value how systems shape their circumstances, how policies can affect their chances for success, or recognize common conditions among women (or any demographic category). The report that follows expands on these perspectives.

While there is much work to be done to better understand how to connect these views to the policy conversation that will improve women's lives, we are optimistic that understanding their core beliefs is the first step toward winning support for policies that improve conditions for all.

In this research, we see opportunities to engage conservative working class women by:

- emphasizing the positive differences women can make through engaging in the public sphere, by supporting more women in elected office, and so on;
- connecting through their relational identities (mother, wife, sister, friend) rather than an abstract sisterhood of women;
- making interconnectedness, systems and structures more visible and tied to their own agency, and
- shifting from problem-centered communications (which sounds like victimization) to a no-nonsense solutions-oriented perspective.

Though there is much work to be done, these ideas and more show promise for engaging conservative-leaning women in a dialogue about policies that benefit all.



Their Own Kind of Feminism

While conservative and moderate working-class women balk at the label “feminist,” they espouse a number of feminist views. They applaud expanded social and economic opportunities for women and evolving family roles for men. They value their own strength and independence and are raising their daughters and granddaughters to be strong and assertive.

At the same time, they have a number of perceptions that hinder their interest in a women’s movement.

- They value individualism and strength of character and quickly reject any assertion that sounds like an excuse or victimization.
- They are highly sensitive to generalizations (gender, race, class) that seem to excuse personal responsibility and agency or blame others (especially men).
- They identify themselves based on the relationships in their lives (mother, wife, daughter, friend, etc.) more than an abstract sense of sisterhood.
- They see and value individual will more than systems and policies that lift all.

Understanding these fundamental beliefs is the first step towards starting a constructive conversation. The rest of this section describes these beliefs in more detail, and includes videos of women sharing their views in their own words.

A STRONG WOMAN’S POWER IS FOUND IN HERSELF.

They see themselves as self-reliant people who persevere in spite of obstacles and have little patience for those who come across as “victims.”

It’s a truism of political analysis that conservatives gravitate toward strength and an ideology of self-reliance, and these women are no exception. They prefer to see themselves (and those they respect) as determined, self-reliant people who make no excuses and who overcome the obstacles in front of them. They raise their daughters to be assertive, capable and able to make their own path in a world of obstacles and opportunity, and talk of raising sons who respect that.

Overcoming struggle, rather than letting it haunt them or derail their life, is part of this strength of will. Many of these women have experienced serious life struggles, including sexual assault and abuse. They see themselves as having persevered and moved on. And while they acknowledge it is hard to move on, they keep moving because the alternative is to wallow in tragedy or be a victim. Resilience and resolve are what women must do. Handling trauma is not a burden, but simply what is or what must be.



► [VIDEO: A STRONG WOMAN’S POWER IS FOUND IN HERSELF.](#)



Similarly, conservatives prefer the idea of handling things as individuals rather than expecting government or policies to deal with obstacles. Involving government is a very high bar—laws and courts are reserved for only the most egregious behaviors. In contrast, many of these women view progressives as seeming to want laws and regulations and politics to solve their problems rather than dealing with things themselves. Expecting policies to handle what they perceive as interpersonal issues seems like avoiding responsibility and allowing oneself to be a victim.

STRONG WOMEN TAKE CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR ACTIONS; THEY DON'T BLAME MEN FOR THEIR PROBLEMS.

Women create the lives they have. Navigating life's difficulties requires women to take action to handle things, rather than blame others or factors outside their control.

Conservative women are highly sensitive to any kind of conversation in which women seem to blame others (especially men, but also society, laws, etc.) for their problems, and as unwilling to claim their own agency and accountability. For example, they view feminism as blaming men, placing men at the center of the problem, suggesting that sexism and misogyny are the central obstacles to women's advancement, so the main solution should be to improve male behavior. **Among these conservative women, however, sexism is much less about how men behave and much more about how women respond to men's behavior.**

In their view, women are not passive victims. They have agency, choices, and those choices have consequences. Like victimization in general, sexism is something you shouldn't allow to happen to you.

When asked if they had ever experienced sexism or been disadvantaged by being a woman, these women pondered and typically responded that no, they hadn't. Not because men had never behaved badly toward them, but because, in their view, they hadn't accepted and tolerated such behavior passively, with resignation.

For these women, admitting to being a victim is not just antithetical to how they want to see themselves dealing with adversity, it is expecting others to do the work (of justice, of healing, of growing up, of moving on) for them.



► [VIDEO: STRONG WOMEN TAKE CONTROL; THEY DON'T BLAME OTHERS.](#)

STRONG WOMEN DON'T DEFER TO THE MEN IN THEIR LIVES.
Strong women manage men—including the fathers, husbands, and brothers who can sometimes be outspoken, unsympathetic, problematic, or sexist. Women put up with and manage the men in their lives, but they don't defer to them.

Most of the interviewed women who are in long-term relationships describe partners they view as equals and vice versa. Several discussed how they do not hesitate to let their partners know their opinions and underscore how they do not wish to change who they are. In these healthy long-term relationships the men in their lives respect and hear their voices.

When it comes to politics, the terrain is more complex and women often navigate situations and expectations. A few of the interviewed women say they do defer to their husbands or boyfriends when it comes to politics, mostly because their partner follows politics and they do not. Many other women, however, believe that expressing opinions their partners do not share is a hallmark of equality in a relationship.

Importantly, for many of the interviewed women, life was not always so. Many of these women describe overcoming beatings and rapes, leaving abusive relationships and confirming their strength, independence and power. Those earlier relationships are often characterized by unequal expectations, where many women felt that they were forced into traditional gender roles without the respect they deserved. They tell of choosing new relationships based on shared values and mutual respect.



► [VIDEO: STRONG WOMEN DON'T DEFER TO THE MEN IN THEIR LIVES.](#)

These women point to the choices they made that created equality—having self-respect, speaking up about their opinions, and sharing responsibilities. In other words, women exerted their own agency to choose their partners and create equal relationships.

THE PERSON—NOT THE CATEGORY—IS WHAT'S RELEVANT.
They are quick to push back on generalizations about any group or category—regardless of shared experience or circumstance—for glossing over personal agency.

In general, conservatives reject the idea that the categories one is born into (such as gender, race, class) define you or play much role in your life outcomes. In their view, people with character find success by navigating the world and its obstacles, and people with less strength of character blame others for their failures. In line with this, **conservative women treat gender differences as real, but stress always the power of the individual to accept or transcend gender expectations.**



In fact, they are highly sensitive to any language that generalizes about girls and boys, such as language that seems to blame boys or excuse girls in scenarios like those discussed in the Kavanaugh hearings. **Both boys and girls are responsible for making good choices, and both can be equally at fault when things go wrong.**

People should be held accountable for their behaviors as individuals, and the category they belong to shouldn’t be relevant. For conservative women, “boys will be boys” is not an acceptable frame for excusing any man’s bad behavior. Boys and men need to be taught and held accountable for their actions. Many women responded to this statement with “girls will be girls,” noting that women are just as likely to be reckless in their youth. **Gender is not deterministic, and following the crowd is not an excuse (e.g. boys being boys); it is up to the individual to do right or wrong, they assert.**

They highlight how girls can be aggressive, prone to fighting, and difficult, and how boys can be sensitive, laid back or emotional. They stress individual temperament of children and the manner in which they are raised as influencing the choices those children make and the adults they become.

Even when it comes to sexual assault, these women point out how neither gender has a monopoly on good or bad



► [VIDEO: THE PERSON—NOT THE CATEGORY—IS WHAT’S RELEVANT.](#)

characteristics and behavior. Whenever men and boys’ bad behaviors were mentioned, many women quickly responded with “girls too.”

The result of this line of thinking is that patterns one might point to about how privileged white males behave toward vulnerable women or about what happens to women who speak out about abuse seem irrelevant. They focus not on the gender differences, but the way in which every individual has to navigate growing up and learning from poor and immature decisions.

“WOMAN” IS NOT THEIR CORE, DEFINING IDENTITY.

Their relationships and identities as daughters, wives, mothers, and friends are central; they feel little connection to women who fall outside personal relationships.

In line with the idea that the person, not the category, is what matters, these women identify much more strongly as part of a family than with the more abstract category of “woman.” **They see themselves linked more with the men in their lives, including relatives such as husbands, sons and fathers, than an abstract sisterhood.**

Because they focus on the relationships in their lives and build their identity through these connections, a woman-focused movement can sometimes seem nonsensical. They reject the idea that they should make political or other decisions based on their identity as a woman, to the exclusion of their thoughts on economics, or Christian values, or all the other things they see affecting their family and community.

For them, gender as a stand-alone identity has little resonance. It is less that they do not see themselves as “women”—to be sure, they do. Instead it is that this does not translate to solidarity based on gender alone, because women are individuals who have different life experiences and struggles. They imagine they have much less in common with other kinds of women—be they liberal, Black, Muslim, coastal elites—than they do with the men they know. **Ideas about an inherent sisterhood or commonly faced struggles often fall flat because they are rooted in the notion that women are marginalized, oppressed or face a disadvantage in society, which these women staunchly resist.**

In fact, they direct a good deal of criticism and hostility toward women who seem to be blaming men for their lot in life.

Surprisingly few centered Christianity or religion as a core feature of their identity. For those who did, it shaped their sense of womanhood, though many pointed out that Christianity was not synonymous with conservatism and they have Christian friends who are not conservative.



► [VIDEO: “WOMAN” IS NOT THEIR CORE, DEFINING IDENTITY.](#)

THE INDIVIDUAL—NOT SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES OR POLICIES—IS WHAT’S IMPORTANT.
They firmly believe the onus is on individuals to make the changes they want to see in their lives.

Where liberals often see systems and structures that we as a society collectively choose to create and can collectively choose to change, conservatives keep the focus on individuals and how they navigate the world they are presented with. Larger patterns and structures are a distraction rather than a lens to understand how things come to be. **From this point of view, changing roles for women “just happened” because women realized their own worth, not because policies or systems changed to provide opportunity. This way of thinking renders many feminist and progressive points of view incomprehensible.**



► [VIDEO: SYSTEMS AND POLICIES ARE LESS IMPORTANT THAN INDIVIDUAL AGENCY.](#)

A persistent focus on “the individual” side-steps connections not just to systems and policies, but also to power—more specifically power differentials (race, gender, wealth, etc.). It is not that most women believe these differences don’t matter—some do and some don’t. However, nearly all agree that simply treating one another with respect could be the panacea to heal these differences.

Thus they bristle at generalizations like the idea that men have more power than women. It comes across as a recklessly blanket statement and as anti-man, rather than a plausible analysis of the culture or our social structures. Indeed, the generalization that men have more power may even be seen as anti-woman because it implies that a woman’s power is not self-determined.

Even when they recognize that our society sometimes stacks the deck against them, they assume that the best response is to do the best you can as an individual, rather than blame and complain about a system you can’t change.

For example, they recognize that the workplace is an arena where women consistently experience inequality in pay, hiring and promotions. Yet, most treat this discrimination as a matter for individuals to navigate with individual solutions.

If a woman cannot negotiate fair treatment at a job, then she should leave it and find a better one, they believe. Perhaps she should improve her chances with more education or by changing her behavior in some way. Complaining to the state or pushing for better workplace protections is not top-of-mind, and may even seem misplaced and intrusive.



► [VIDEO: WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION IS REAL; INDIVIDUALS HAVE TO NAVIGATE IT.](#)



Abuse & Assault: Personal and Public Collide

Conservative, working-class white women are well aware of male violence and abuse. In fact, many of the interviewed women shared with us their personal experiences of violence and abuse. Still, their views are complicated.

- On one hand, most see the #MeToo movement as a good thing. At the same time, they worry about taking things “too far.”
- Their desire to handle challenges individually results in questions about whether, when and how a “private” episode becomes a matter for outside intervention.
- Their emphasis on equality between the sexes causes them to put as much responsibility on women as on men.
- Their belief in their own agency and control leads to a focus on what women could and should do, leaving men’s actions out of the picture.
- Assault may not say something about a man’s character; it might just be “bad judgement.”

These fundamental views go a long way toward explaining why conservative women reacted as they did to the Ford-Kavanaugh story.

WHEN IT COMES TO SEXUAL ASSAULT, TIMES HAVE CHANGED FOR THE BETTER.
Women have more ability to speak up. They need to use that power wisely.

Most feel the #MeToo movement is a good thing because it allows women to speak about their experiences. And yet, many are conflicted. They are concerned about people exploiting the new cultural climate for their own ends, both personally and politically. They worry about those who seem to be

maneuvering to be victims or who are using accusations of unwanted sexual advances/assault to their advantage—even for minor or debatable transgressions. **It seems to them that public accusations without proof or fair trial are enough to bring down powerful and successful men.**

The idea that a single transgression could permanently derail a man’s life is a deeply troubling thought to these women, whose families include husbands, sons, fathers, and nephews who may or may not have behaved blamelessly themselves. The idea that such accusations could be deployed against men by people with hostile intentions, and that those accusations are to be believed without question or investigation, is frightening to them.



► [VIDEO: SPEAK UP, BUT USE THAT POWER WISELY.](#)

These dynamics in mind, it makes sense to them to treat sexual assault as private and deal with it personally, unless it rises to the level of a crime, in which case evidence, proof, investigations, formal charges and so on should be brought.

SEXUAL ASSAULT: A CRIME OR BAD JUDGEMENT?
What most would call criminal sexual assault, these women would often dismiss as “bad judgement” that says nothing about a man’s character.

These women believe a person should be held accountable for criminal sexual assault, even from decades ago. However, **their bar for criminal sexual assault is high, with a man’s intent mattering just as much as a woman’s consent.**

According to the United States Department of Justice, sexual assault is “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient.” Conservative working-class women point to mitigating factors that determine where they draw the bright line of sexual assault. For them, a man’s intent matters, not just a woman’s consent. Conservative women think it is in a woman’s power to make it clear to men if their advances are unwanted, because a man may not mean harm. The way to know a man is being malicious (and therefore moving into criminal territory) is if he persists even when a woman did everything possible to stop his behavior. Lack of consent is insufficient, and putting oneself in a bad situation means at least sharing responsibility for when things go wrong. Moreover, if the issue is really about “bad judgment” then a woman shares responsibility for questionable or poor decisions like wearing revealing clothing, going somewhere potentially dangerous, or drinking enough to affect her mental capacity. **In this sense, men’s actions almost totally drop out of the picture, and it becomes about women being “smart” by anticipating what could make them vulnerable.** In short, a woman must

always be aware of what she is doing and how others, in particular men, could read it as an indication of how she wants to be treated.

In their view, drinking results in bad decisions by everyone, so assault is a “bad decision,” in other words. That means that it does not necessarily say something fundamental about a man’s character, in particular because it may come from misread cues rather than intent to harm. This is why women hold other women particularly responsible for their actions, as they place women as the ultimate gatekeepers of sexual behavior who must be clear about what they do not want.

These women have a deeply ingrained notion that enduring this kind of behavior goes with being female. Many of the interviewed women shared experiences of sexual assault or harassment, and yet they afforded a great deal of leniency to the men if they knew them or worked with them. In addition to managing their own trauma, these sexual assault victims find themselves carrying an extra burden—deciding whether or not to “ruin his life” by pursuing criminal charges. In our interviews, women mentioned this theme repeatedly, as though her act of reporting, not his assault, is what “ruins a man’s life.”



► [VIDEO: A CRIME OR BAD JUDGEMENT?](#)



The Political Arena

Though most voted Republican in 2016, the interviewed women are not highly ideological or partisan. They are frustrated with politics and politicians and see little connection to their own lives and communities.

At the same time, they care deeply about their families and communities, which suggests that a way to engage these women is by highlighting solutions that will make things better for their families and communities.

POLITICS, POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MEDIA ACT IN THEIR OWN SELF-INTEREST, NOT THE COMMON GOOD.

These women disdain politics and are often disillusioned with parties and the media.

Most of the interviewed conservative women do not like to talk politics precisely because it is a source of conflict and controversy. They avoid political topics with family and friends in order to avoid disagreement and to not get enmeshed in what they see as toxic discourse.

Often they are disillusioned and fed up with politicians, who conservative women see as making empty promises to help people but who in their estimation are only interested in helping themselves. They also distrust political parties, often for the same reason—for putting the interests of the party over the interests of the people they purport to represent.

While some of these women identify as conservative, they are not on the whole strongly ideological. Most of these women don't have strongly favorable views of the Republican party; they are critical of both parties and politics in general. Yet their admiration of what they see as strength, individual responsibility and conservative values draws them more to GOP candidates. In contrast, the Democratic party, with its seemingly reductive identity politics (including the focus on women's issues), its concerns about victimization of the vulnerable, and its willingness to have the state step in to solve people's problems, seems antithetical to their values and life experience.

They have a sense of what they think is right and how the world should work, but do not adhere to a partisan ideology as a whole. Rather, there are elements of conservatism or particular issues that become touch points for some women but they do not seem to strongly align with the Republican party. In fact, many women seemed to raise more critiques of liberals and Democrats than say positive things about Republicans.



► [VIDEO: DISILLUSIONED WITH POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTIES](#)

Strength and agency seems to be what draws them to GOP candidates while victimization pushes them away from Democrats. Many identify as independents as a way to assert themselves and stay out of and above the fray of politics.

Beyond the distrust of politics and parties, many women expressed a distrust of media more generally. While some keep up with the news and current events, many women have little desire to do so. This disillusionment and distrust stemmed from presumed bias from the media itself, and the idea that media seeks to sensationalize events for their own self-interest.

THERE IS NO “PRO-WOMAN” PARTY, AND PERHAPS THERE SHOULDN’T BE.

They don’t identify with a sisterhood of women, see most issues through an individual lens, and have disdain for politics, so a “pro-woman” political party doesn’t make much sense to them.

In their view, neither party is pro-woman, and they aren’t exactly sure what “pro-woman” would mean. They firmly believe there should be more women in elected office but also believe that “women’s issues” (such as assault) shouldn’t be partisan. **To them, advancing an agenda designed to help women sounds sexist and divisive. They would rather help everyone.**

In fact, though they recognize and to some extent applaud the way that gender expectations have been changing, they don’t give much credence to larger structures of power, and don’t see much need for a women’s

movement to push for changes or for a political party to be looking out for women in particular. They assume that cultural change happens due to individuals making choices, not policies—women just decided to get higher education and careers, women decided to insist men do more of the housework, and so on.

Since they struggle to connect the dots between life circumstances, systems and policies, having one party focus on “women” doesn’t make common sense to them.



► [VIDEO: A “PRO-WOMAN” PARTY MAKES LITTLE SENSE TO THEM.](#)



The Kavanaugh Hearings seen through a Conservative Lens

By comprehending conservative and moderate women’s views on gender, power and politics, we can better understand why the Ford-Kavanaugh situation has played out in the way it has.

Their focus on strength, agency and individual responsibility extends to how Dr. Ford should have dealt with sexual assault. For example, while they recognize that not all assaults can be prevented, in their view, a woman has to take what control she can, and learn to not put herself in the position of being endangered or abused. **If a young and inexperienced Dr. Ford was drinking and partying with high school boys, she put herself in a bad position and bore the consequences.**

Furthermore, inner strength means speaking up, not staying quiet. Even those women who accepted that Dr. Ford had likely been abused felt that rather than publicly blaming Judge Kavanaugh now for events more than 30 years ago, she should have either spoken up at the time or dealt with it privately. Most of these women, especially those who have been abused, understand why victims often don’t speak up right away. **They don’t want to fault her for staying quiet, but having made that decision they believe she shouldn’t bring it up after more than 30 years—especially in a public, political forum seemingly in order to derail a man’s career.**



► [VIDEO: YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE MISTAKES.](#)

Assault does not necessarily say something fundamental about a man’s character. To the contrary, these women believe Kavanaugh’s seemingly good record and character since high school eclipses potential blemishes or bad decisions from his past. While they rejected the idea that “boys will be boys,” **they can view individuals like Kavanaugh through a lens that rationalizes poor judgements or bad decisions as stemming from their youth.**

Because “member of a family” is more of a core identity than “female,” family was the lens through which these women viewed the Kavanaugh hearings. **In Brett Kavanaugh—especially in his moments of anger—they saw a man defending himself and his family against attack.** In contrast, in Dr. Ford they saw a woman stepping forward alone, airing an old personal grievance, attempting to ruin a man’s life and the lives of his wife and daughters. They saw liberal politicians who seemed willing to exploit that for political gain.

Strong women overcome struggles. Instead of dwelling on a past trauma, or blaming it for present troubles, a woman should move on. The women we spoke to don’t understand why Dr. Ford chose to come forward after all these decades, but they assume that she must have had a hidden agenda—personal gain, revenge, a

political hit, or she was just lashing out because she couldn’t let go of the past. The fact that it was all playing out in partisan politics just drives home to them that this was about dueling political agendas, not sexual assault. Recall that the women we interviewed who were victims of assault sometimes noted that they didn’t pursue charges because they didn’t want to “ruin his life.” Some can view women as being vindictive by reporting. This point of view goes to a whole new scale when it plays out in the public arena. When assault enters the public sphere it is because the accuser “has an agenda,” otherwise it would remain firmly in the private sphere—where it belongs—to be handled by the people involved. **Moving this matter to the public stage opens Dr. Ford to the critique that this is all an attempt to ruin Kavanaugh’s career.**



► [VIDEO: A POLITICAL AGENDA](#)



If this situation is about airing an old grievance or playing politics, it is easy to imagine such an accusation coming out of the blue to potentially destroy the reputations of the men in their lives. They note that no one lives an unblemished life, that attitudes about things like assault are changing and in dispute, and that politics has become ever more divisive and destructive. If a man is going to be held to account in the public sphere, an accusation alone can't be enough. There must be evidence, proof, and due process. This is a high bar, and it is one that many of these women wanted to hold Dr. Ford to. If she was going to insist on a public reckoning, including the “punishment” of being excluded from the Supreme Court and having his reputation destroyed, then there needs to be evidence and proof. **The fact that many seem to regard Kavanaugh as guilty just based on an accusation is deeply troubling to these women.**

For these women, accusations are not proof. Accusations without follow through are just attempts to destroy people's lives. This facet in particular, that accusations alone without incontrovertible evidence to back them up could be taken seriously, are what make them nervous for the men in their lives—not the possibility of actual misbehavior. Instead, the imagined threat that one accusation can destroy a man's reputation is their concern. Their empathy lies with the potential unraveling of a man's family or the end of his career, rather than the woman who may only have her word to back her up.

The Ford-Kavanaugh situation didn't suggest to them that one political party is pro-woman while the other is anti-woman. Most concluded it was simply an accusation by one person against another—a personal matter rather than one that outsiders were in a position to settle. Although most of these women are not particularly partisan, many had a sense that liberal intolerance about sexism, including the dredging up of past behaviors, was swinging the pendulum too far.



► [VIDEO: AN ACCUSATION ISN'T ENOUGH.](#)

Conclusion: Opportunities and Next Steps

There are certainly openings for engaging conservative-leaning women. This exploratory research suggests potential strategies to start conversations with conservative and moderate working-class women, though more research is needed to test these hypotheses.

There is potential to engage these women in collective action by emphasizing the positive differences women can make through engaging in the public sphere, by supporting more women in elected office, and so on. Since they applaud expanded social and economic opportunities for women, fluid gender roles in the home, and more generally, empowering women in their lives and in the nation, they should be open to an affirmative message about increasing women's positive influence in their communities and the nation.

Instead of attempting to engage by calling on their identity as women, it will likely be far more effective to engage through the lens of their relationships with others, and link those relationships to collective action. Some of what distances conservative women from a policy agenda that will lead to progress for all, is how “identity” is defined and tied to the bigger questions of politics, society and culture change. For progressive feminists, “woman” is often core to their identity as well as a political and cultural stance. It can shape how they view their life experiences, their connection to other women, and their view of how the world works. The working-class, conservative white women we interviewed resist being pigeon-holed within a demographic category like “woman.” They

are far more likely to identify themselves based on the relationships in their lives; they are wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, church members and people who care. These identities—for example, “mothers working to improve the community,” “daughters speaking up for their parents' Medicare,” “friends who want to heal toxic discourse and problem solve together”—are more likely to connect with their life experience.

Finding effective ways to make systems and structures more visible, and to heighten a sense of interconnectedness, may cause them to take their strong sense of personal agency into the realm of collective action. It is essential to develop strategies that connect their individual perspective to a sense of shared fate. As a default, they see each individual as responsible for her or his own fate, and social categories and expectations are just one of many things that individuals accept or transcend as their strength and circumstances allow. Conservative women rely on a rich understanding of individual choices, agency, and responsibility, and tend to deemphasize or dismiss the (rather arid and impersonal) “big picture” of systems, structures, and policies. Clearly this is an area that needs more investigation to develop the right stories, experiences and tools.

Success stories where gains for and by women came about through policy or collective action, such as Title IX, may teach that gains for women have not happened because society simply progressed or because women got fed up and asked men to do more housework. Success stories that highlight gains through policy and collective action reinforce the critical notion of female empowerment, while sidestepping the off-putting (for conservative women) critique of men.

No nonsense, solutions-oriented approaches and explanatory messages are likely to motivate them. These are strong women who are accustomed to overcoming adversity and who admire those who are similarly driven. We see in these interviews a potential opening for these women to begin to see themselves as uniquely positioned and capable of doing the hard work to make changes in their lives and society at large.

When it comes to sexual assault, we see a need to bring men’s responsibility into the picture. Right now, conservative women hear the issue as: 1) women as victims (which collides with their desire for personal agency); and 2) women blaming men (which frustrates their need to align with the men in their lives). Perhaps there is an opportunity to set the expectation that this is not just a woman’s issue (suggesting women need to take steps to protect themselves) but also a man’s issue (perhaps calling on men to stand up against bad male behavior).

Finally, while there are broad lessons emerging from this work, thoughtful segmentation and strategic targeting will bolster effective engagement.

Those who are divorced and either remarried or in another long-term committed relationship are winnable, in particular because unhappy experiences in their first marriage, ranging

from abuse to expectations of old-fashioned domesticity, have allowed them to become more invested in their independence and progress as women.

Younger women, in particular those under 35 years old, express views that are socially liberal, in particular when it comes to gay and trans rights, and many of them believe sexual assault and harassment warrant more attention.

Those who are less news-attentive are important targets, because they are not strongly ideological and are therefore open to exploring new ideas. By sharp contrast, those who are highly news-attentive are also highly ideological; they have determined their stance and are less likely to shift.

Though there is much work to be done, there are many openings to engage conservative women in a dialogue about progress for all.



Methodology

The goal of a Topos project is to create simple but profound shifts in perspective that help communicators engage better with their audiences, and to create better, more constructive understandings that present clearer scope for action.

This project was exploratory and consisted of ethnography supplemented with in-depth interviews. The strength of this anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people’s experience of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography—the observation and description of people in their natural environments, and the effort to engage with people on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. These semi-structured interviews approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. One of the key goals is to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or heard before.

In October 2018, during and directly after the Kavanaugh hearings, 42 women were interviewed by anthropologists. All are white, moderate or conservative-leaning, though most are not strongly political or partisan. All but two are registered to vote and one additional interviewee declined to say. Seven have a four-year college degree, 19 have some post-high school education, and 16 a high school education. Thirty-six of the women have children, 21 are currently married, 9 have long-term unmarried relationships, 8 identify as single (4 are single mothers with children), and 4 are widowed. Although not asked, 10 of the women volunteered that they had suffered domestic or sexual abuse in the past.

Anthropologists worked in two locations: suburban Tucson, Arizona (15 interviews), and along the border of North and South Carolina (15 interviews). Topos ethnographers approached women in public spaces and invited them to take part in these research conversations. This approach enables Topos to reach and engage with people who would not normally take part in opinion research. Twelve additional in-depth interviews were conducted by phone and in person around the country including Oregon, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Kentucky and New York. The five Topos interviewers were all white and female.

ABOUT TOPOS

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new tools to win support.

For more information: topospartnership.com
Or email us: team@topospartnership.com

ABOUT GALVANIZE USA

GALvanize USA creates organizing tools and strategies that support white women to develop the political knowledge and confidence needed to advance agendas that work for all of us. White women are the single largest voting bloc in America, yet the majority have historically voted along with white men to uphold the status quo. In this political moment, many of these women are experiencing an awakening, disturbed by the direction our country is taking. GALvanize USA conducts research to understand the social and cultural barriers that continue to hold white women back from standing up for political views that reflect their values. We design and test tools and strategies to overcome these barriers and share what works with a national network of partners.

Learn more at GALvanizeUSA.org