

Paul Elam (left) created a website where men could publicly name women who accused them of rape.

anonymous for fear of personal attacks—which she received, along with numerous death threats.

“It is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of,” the president said. “This is a very, very—this is a very difficult time.”

His words must have been music to the ears of Paul Elam, founder of the “men’s rights” website A Voice for Men. Some Republicans, Elam had recently blogged, “[danced] like court jesters, hoping to get Kavanaugh approved without getting in trouble with the women.” He decried what he characterized as “rape liar” Blasey Ford’s plan to “ruin” Kavanaugh, lamenting the fact that she had been “given every opportunity to feel warm and fuzzy while she persecute[d] and destroy[ed] an innocent man.”

Less than a week later, at the justice’s swearing-in ceremony, Trump apologized to Kavanaugh directly for the “terrible pain and suffering you have been forced to endure.” Kavanaugh, of course, had just become one of the nine most powerful judges in the nation.

Men’s rights activists have flourished on the internet for well over two decades, but their views no longer inhabit the fringes of American society. Many of their beliefs are now explicitly reflected in the highest political office of the land.

The confirmation hearings were also a boon to groups like Elam’s, which have long trumpeted the view that most rape allegations are false, brought by women who seek to control men. As they see it, feminism is a scourge that has rewritten history to cast men as the villains. Men, they argue, are the real marginalized class—victims of skewed child custody laws, high suicide rates and military deaths—while women earn special

In the minds of angry men’s rights supporters, it’s feminists who are always to blame

BY STEPHANIE RUSSELL-KRAFT

ON OCT. 2, JUST DAYS BEFORE BRETT KAVANAUGH WAS SWORN IN as a justice on the Supreme Court of the United States, President Donald Trump came to his defense. It seemed, in Trump’s view, that Kavanaugh was under attack. Christine Blasey Ford had just publicly testified that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her while they were both in high school. Blasey Ford testified that she still suffered from the trauma of the event and that she had initially wanted to remain

privileges and protections. “Our concept of male power and male oppression of women is a myth,” wrote one of A Voice for Men’s many bloggers. “A myth developed by feminists and gynocentric women to help mask female power in modern society.”

Their power and appeal stem in large part from their ability to recast men as victims and feminists as the true oppressors. “When we talk about patriarchy and male supremacy, we immediately have the image of dominance,” says Juliet Williams, professor of gender studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. “We forget that a tool in the arsenal of any dominant group is sometimes ... claiming the mantle of the underdog.”

In other words, she says, “Patriarchy was bad enough, but now we’re having patriarchy presenting itself as ... a marginalized, unfairly discriminated-against ideology.”



THE CONTEMPORARY MEN’S RIGHTS movement has roots in the “men’s liberation” movement of the 1970s, which was not incompatible with feminism in that its members were chiefly interested in rewriting gender expectations. But by the 1980s, men’s rights activists began to see themselves as explicitly anti-feminist. Instead of critiquing gender roles, they began to critique feminists, without whom everything would still be great, or so they believed. In 1993, Warren Farrell became the father of today’s movement with his bestseller *The Myth of Male Power*, which argued that men are as oppressed as women, or even more so.

By the 1990s, as women gained ground in education, employment and political representation, it became easier to argue that the fight for women’s equality was no longer needed. Continued calls for expanded women’s rights could be cast as dangerous and overreaching because, explains Kristin Anderson, psychologist and author of

Modern Misogyny, “if you assume the playing field is level, then any complaint about sexism is read as man-hating.”

Men’s rights groups espouse what could be considered an upside-down version of feminism. For example, they might be upset over gendered expectations that boys not show emotion, outdated notions of chivalry or the fact that men typically receive shorter parental leave—all targets of feminist critique—and use them as examples that women are secretly running the show. Oftentimes, they recognize the problem but make dangerously wrong conclusions about who has real power.

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Today, the men’s rights movement is a loose coalition of online communities often called the “manosphere.” There are different pockets, each with their own core identities. There are self-declared men’s rights activists (MRAs), pickup artists (PUAs), men going their own way (MGTOW) and involuntary celibates (incels). Individual men are often enticed by what they see as an explanation for their personal unhappiness. Too often, it’s women. Their websites are “like wildlife refuges for misogynist ideas,” wrote journalist David Neiwert in his recent book, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*.

Anti-feminism has long been a unifying force on the far right, bridging some of the gaps between groups such as white nationalists and evangelical Christians. Because of this, men’s rights groups are often a gateway to other violent ideologies that blend misogyny with racism, anti-Semitism, transphobia and more. There’s a particularly strong correlation between misogyny and white supremacy, an ideology with a deep history of violence against African Americans and immigrants.

The manosphere drew national attention in 2014 with the killing spree of self-declared incel Elliot Rodger near the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the “GamerGate” saga, in which male supremacists and members of the alt-right led a coordinated online harassment campaign against feminists in the gaming industry. The online communities involved in both incidents have since been recognized as dangerous and are now being tracked by both the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). In 2018, the SPLC for the first time classified male supremacy as a distinct ideology of hate, noting that, “Like white supremacy, male supremacy is driven by fear and anger at the loss of white male status.”

A 2019 ADL report on violence and extremism linked a 2018 shooting at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Fla., to the misogynistic incel movement. The attack followed a similar shooting spree in Toronto and Rodger’s in California. The ADL now tracks incel-linked murders and says it “considers misogyny a dangerous and underestimated component of extremism.”

In that same report, the ADL drew a line connecting men’s rights groups to Trump’s election. “Donald Trump’s 2016 victory—secured after a recording of the candidate bragging about sexually assaulting women was made public—was a glorious vindication of misogynists’ worldview,” the report says. “Some of [his] voters presumably saw Trump as a corrective, a bulwark against the fear that their privileged status—as men, as white people—is at risk.”

For many in the U.S., the 2016 presidential election burst the illusion of women's perceived equality. Trump's victory was a slap in the face to those who believed the country had moved past its openly racist and misogynist ways.

Other voters saw the election as a defense against feminist excess. In Trump, men's rights activists found a man who was willing to fight their fight.

Since he has taken office, Trump has behaved in ways that are gratifying to men's rights activists. Most of his picks for the federal judiciary have been white men. He has publicly defended and lauded alleged sexual predators like Bill O'Reilly, Roger Ailes and former White House staff secretary Rob Porter, who was credibly accused of domestic violence by multiple ex-wives. He has targeted black women among the White House press corps, singling them out for public ridicule. He has rolled back protections for transgender citizens and attempted to bar transgender service members from the military. He has changed

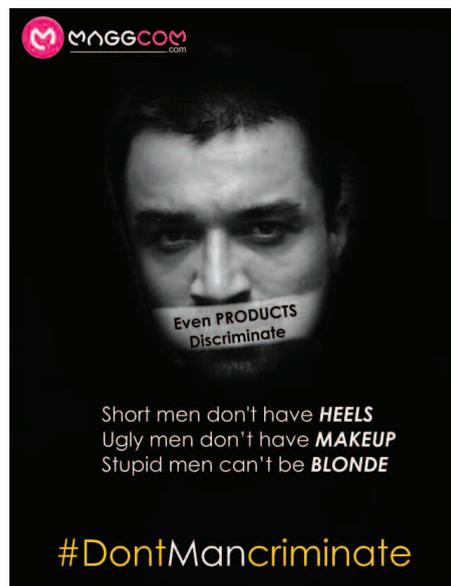
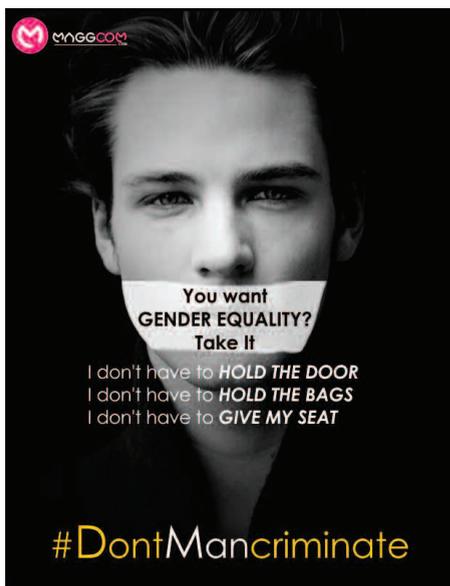
U.S. policy to deny asylum to women fleeing domestic violence, in direct conflict with international law. In February, the Department of Health and Human Services issued the final version of a Title X gag rule that will prevent health clinics from referring patients to abortion providers and require them to separate their abortion work from other services like birth control and routine checkups.

But the biggest legacy Trump has bestowed on the men's rights movement might be the legitimacy he has given to the inaccurate view that most rape allegations are false.

Dismantling Title IX, which was passed in 1972 to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex in education, has been one of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos' pet projects. Shortly after taking office in 2017, DeVos rescinded a slew of Obama-era Title IX guidelines that provided greater protections to victims of sexual violence and extended those protections to trans and gender-nonbinary students. She then set about a plan to dial back enforcement of Title IX for sexual assault on campus. In preparing her Title IX revisions, DeVos seemed to prioritize meetings with men's rights groups and young men accused of sexual assault.

A proposed Title IX rule change—which recently finished its public comment period—would make it harder for survivors to report crimes and subject them to cross-examination against their will. "It's returning us to a time when it's a lot easier to sweep allegations of rape and sexual harassment under the rug," says B. Ever Hanna, campus policy manager at End Rape on Campus, a nonprofit survivor advocacy organization. The proposed changes also provide expanded protections to students who are accused of sexual assault. "It creates the ability for someone who is accused of sexual assault under Title IX to then seek Title IX protection," Hanna explains. "This looks like: A woman accuses a man of sexual assault, ... then, the man says, 'This investiga-

Clockwise from top left: A Canadian men's rights group spoofs the "Don't Be That Guy" rape awareness campaign; websites like Paul Elam's A Voice for Men portray men as victims; men have it rough too, says online magazine Maggcom.



“It’s fight fire with fire. If you’re accused of abuse, accuse your accuser of abuse.”

—CARRIE N. BAKER, PROFESSOR OF GENDER STUDIES AT SMITH COLLEGE, REFERRING TO REGISTER-HER.COM

tion of sexual assault ... targeted me because of my gender.”

“There’s a long history of the men’s rights movement minimizing male violence against women and portraying men themselves, and particularly perpetrators, as victims of feminism and of women and of the court system,” says Carrie N. Baker, a women and gender studies professor at Smith College and frequent *Ms.* contributor. A Voice for Men’s Elam is also the creator of the now-defunct website Register-her.com, a place for men to publicly name women they claim have made false rape accusations. “It’s fight fire with fire,” Baker says. “If you’re accused of abuse, accuse your accuser of abuse.”



LIKE TRUMP AND KAVANAUGH, A TYPICAL MEMBER OF THE mansphere is a white, heterosexual man. Some are younger men who feel alienated in the dating world; some are older men who have gone through a divorce or difficult custody battle. Men’s rights groups have traction because they appeal to individual men’s feelings of disempowerment, according to Matthew N. Lyons, an independent researcher who studies right-wing movements.

When these men are called out for their racism or their misogyny, they feel victimized. According to psychologist Anderson, many men feel personally targeted whenever they are presented with a critique of male power or patriarchy. “A criticism of sexism is a criticism of the man you’re telling that to, so you can be talking about patriarchy and sexism that has nothing to do with him individually in that moment and he sees it as an attack on him,” she says. “He can’t understand the structural nature of sexism, that it’s built into our institutions and our cultural practices.”

That’s where the danger is. Men’s rights groups paint any feminist activism as a full-scale attack on all men.

“On the one hand, you have reality, which is that Brett Kavanaugh is on the Supreme Court and the politics of the Supreme Court continue to the right,” says Williams, the professor of gender studies. “And on the other hand, you have complaints about metaphorical problems like [Kavanaugh] ‘being dragged through the mud,’ which ... doesn’t seem to be connected to any real-world effects.”

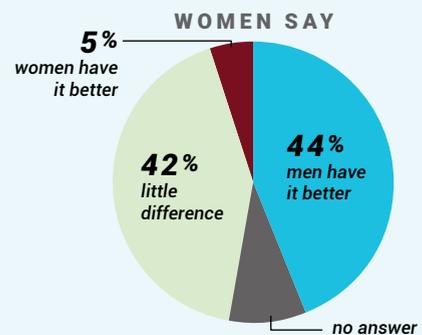
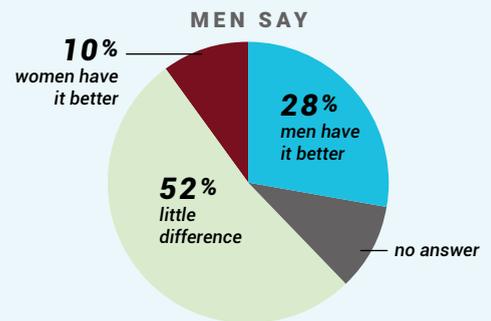
Unlike Trump and Kavanaugh, most men’s rights supporters don’t hold national-level political positions. If such men can be cast as martyrs of a feminist power grab, it’s not hard to make a regular Joe feel like one too.

Now tell us again, Mr. Trump, how this Supreme Court justice is the real victim. ■

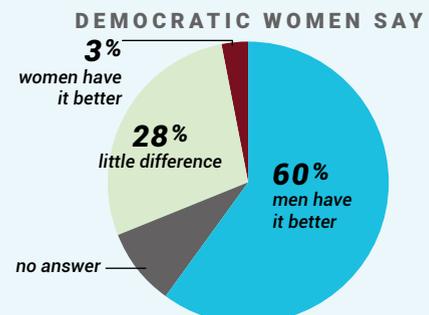
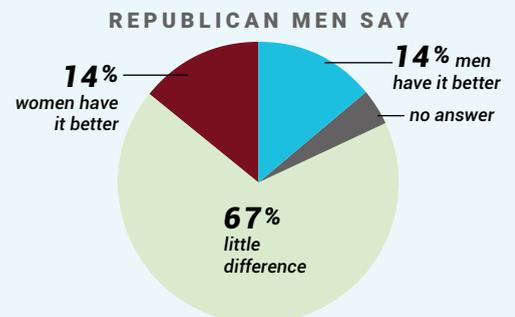
STEPHANIE RUSSELL-KRAFT covers the intersections of religion, law and gender for *The New Republic*, *The Nation* and *The Atlantic*, among other publications.

Who Has It Better: Men or Women?

The answer depends on whom you ask.



Party affiliation widens the gap.



Source: Politico/Morning Consult online poll of nearly 2,000 registered voters