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421

**What Do Women
Want?**

Moderated by Kate O' Beirne



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What Do Women Want?

Kate O' Beirne

This political season, the American public has been told countless times that it is the year of the woman. Many of the unprecedented number of women running for office, we are told, were motivated by the Clarence Thomas hearings and the reception accorded Anita Hill by an all-male Senate Judiciary Committee. Even though public opinion polls last fall indicated clearly that the majority of American women found Hill's allegations incredible and backed the Thomas nomination, scores of women candidates are on the hustings vowing to right the wrong done to Anita Hill on behalf of all of us. Hill's vindication apparently will be complete when the feminist agenda is enacted—mandatory family leave, 50 percent female representation in the board room, nationalized child care and health care, abortion on demand, and presumably higher taxes to pay for all of it.

While the media celebrate “We are women, hear us roar” on some campaign trails, other women candidates are running on a conservative agenda—smaller government, lower taxes on families, better schools, and safer neighborhoods. Is this a gender-blind platform, or are women far more concerned about their family budgets, neighborhoods, and schools than they are about access to the executive wash room and sexual harassment on the job? Well, we are here today to find out. What do women want?

We are absolutely delighted to welcome the distinguished panel that has joined us this afternoon. Each of these speakers has made important contributions to the public debate in the area of women's impact on politics and policy, and to enjoy their collective wisdom is a rare treat.

Our first speaker is Karlyn Keene of the American Enterprise Institute. Karlyn is currently editor of the *American Enterprise Magazine*, flagship publication of AEI, where she has been since 1979. From 1981 until 1989 at AEI, Karlyn was Managing Editor of their *Public Opinion Magazine*. Her most recent writings of particular interest to us, given our topic today, include “American College Women: Education Interests, Career Expectations, Social Outlook and Values,” and “Feminism Versus Women's Rights.” We have asked Karlyn to address what polls tell us about women and current issues.

Our second speaker, Midge Decter, is an author and editor whose essays and reviews in the field of social criticism have appeared over the past two decades in countless publications. Midge has written a book called *The Liberated Woman and Other Americans*, again of particular interest to us today, and has been the Acting Managing Editor of *Commentary*, the Executive Editor of *Harper's Literary Review*, and Senior Editor at Basic Books. She is currently Distinguished Fellow at the Institute on Religion and Public Life in New York and is a trustee of The Heritage Foundation. Midge Decter is going to address how feminist ideology has affected relationships between the sexes.

And finally, our third speaker, Linda Chavez, is John M. Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute. She is author of *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*, published by Basic Books in 1991 and recently out in paperback. She writes frequently on public policy and regularly appears on national news shows offering commentary on current issues. Linda has served as Executive Director of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and as head of the Office of Public Liaison at the White House. Linda will round out our panel by addressing what went wrong with the women's liberation movement.

So please join me in welcoming our three panelists.

Karlyn Keene

I can't answer the question of what women want, but I can tell you what they have been saying to the public opinion pollsters over the course of the last year. In the three most recent trial heats that have been taken this year by CBS, Yankelovich, and the *Washington Post*, about 35 percent of women indicate that they will be voting for George Bush, compared to a solid majority who indicate that they will be voting for Bill Clinton. In the 24 public opinion polls that have been taken since Ross Perot dropped out of the race, George Bush has never received the votes of more than four in ten women in the electorate, and Bill Clinton has in all but one instance received over 50 percent of the vote of women.

We have heard a lot about the gender gap in American politics, and I would like to tell you a little bit about the history of the gap and why we are paying so much attention to it. Then I will spend a few minutes on the issues that women tell the pollsters interest them most in the fall.

The issue began to command our attention in the late 1970s, because we saw something in American politics that we have never seen before: men and women were beginning to express different preferences in politics. The issue became important in 1980 because, for the first time in our history, the rate of voting by men and women was the same. Prior to that time, women's participation had lagged—not significantly—but still there was a difference in the participation rate of men and women. In 1980, the rate of voting by men and women became equal. This year the rate of voting by women is probably going to exceed that of men by a slight margin. And of course, because there are more women in the population than men, you had about three million more women voting than men in the 1988 election. In this election it will probably be a slightly higher number, around the three to four million.

In Britain this year, the gender gap has a very different complexion than in the United States. If only women had voted there, Conservative leader John Major would have had a hundred seat majority in Parliament, according to Anthony King, one of the best election analysts in Britain. If only men had voted, the Conservative Party would have been the largest party in a hung Parliament. So what is happening in the United States may be unique. Women here are becoming slightly more Democratic, men more Republican.

Birth of the Gender Gap. As I said earlier, women's voting patterns are changing, too. Before 1980 men and women not only participated at roughly the same rate, with women lagging a little bit behind, but they voted in virtually identical patterns. As recently as 1976, that pattern held. But four years later we saw evidence that the pattern was beginning to change. That year Reagan carried the women's vote narrowly, 47 percent to 45 percent; among men, however, Reagan swamped Carter, 57 percent to 36 percent. So, the gender gap was born. Journalists began giving it a lot of attention, not just because the voting rate was the same for both sexes, but because preferences were beginning to be expressed in a different way.

The gender gap now appears to be a distinctive feature of our politics. It is what we call in the survey research world "patterned" It appears across all groups—all age groups, all income groups—and so you see something that is really distinctive and quite different. It is not the largest gap, by far, in American politics. If you look at the attitudes of black and white Americans, the differences in their political preferences are far larger than the differences of men and women; and interestingly, differences by marital status are larger than differences by gender. Married voters are more Republican than single voters. The reason that gender is getting so much attention is in part because of the changing demographics affecting women.

The issues that appear to be dividing the sexes since the mid-1970s are the following:

- ◆ **Women generally tell the pollsters that they prefer a stronger role for government.**

This is not limited to the kind of issues we hear described as “women’s issues.” Though you see differences on questions such as government’s role in child care, comparable worth, and the like, it is much broader than that. Women prefer a stronger role for government in the area of the environment. If you ask men and women today whether or not they want government to enact a national health care plan, to that broad general question when no price tag is attached, both men and women say, “Yes, in fact, we like the general idea.” But women favor it more strongly than do men.

If you ask men and women about whether government should guarantee everyone a job, women say, “Yes, the government should guarantee everyone a job”; men say, “That should not be the case.” So, polls consistently show that women want government to have a stronger role.

- ◆ **Women are also much more pessimistic about the country’s economic future than are men.**

We are equally confident about our personal futures, but we are much more pessimistic about the economic future of the country. You can hold age constant, you can hold income constant—a woman making over \$50,000 a year is much less confident than a man at that level. We did not see this in survey data before the mid-1970s. I don’t think it is coincidental that some of the gender differences that we are talking about began to emerge when women themselves were becoming major actors in the workforce, often the last hired, often at the bottom of the economic ladder.

- ◆ **Women are also lagging indicators in terms of the economy.**

They are much less likely to believe that at this point the recession is ending, perhaps suggesting problems for the Administration in the fall. They are lagging indicators in a number of other areas: they were much less likely than men to believe that the fundamental nature of the Soviet regime had changed.

- ◆ **Women also are becoming more risk-averse.**

We see this on policy questions about things like the location of a nuclear power plant, chemical additives in food, riding on the space shuttle if given an opportunity—the last produces a 35 percentage point difference between men and women.

One area that does not produce differences between men and women are the so-called women’s issues—the Equal Rights Amendment did not, abortion does not today. Level of education and income are far stronger predictors of differences on issues such as abortion.

Women, like men, are telling the pollsters that the most important issue to them in the fall is the economy—that is the number one, the number two, and the number three issue overall; nothing else comes close. Issues like abortion will probably move a small group of voters in the electorate. In the last two elections 7 percent of Americans told CBS News that abortion was the most important issue for them in deciding their vote. This group voted more Republican than Democratic. In both of those elections, abortion benefitted the Republicans overwhelmingly. The Clarence Thomas issue is showing up in a few state polls as an issue, but it is certainly not moving the electorate as a whole.

That is a quick summary of where women are today and what they are telling the pollsters. But before closing, I would like to touch on the label "feminist" itself. We have data from the Yankelovich/Clancy/Schulman poll for *Time* Magazine from two weeks ago. About 31 percent of American women are calling themselves feminist; nearly two-thirds reject that term. Interestingly, there is very little difference in attitudes on a whole series of issues between those women who call themselves feminists and those who do not accept the label. The one issue where they differ very strongly is on perceptions of the women's movement itself, with feminists and those who don't embrace the label expressing very different views. Interestingly, R. H. Bruskin did a survey for Whittle Communications on college campuses, and only a third of young women on college campuses accepted the label "feminist." The women's movement is a very popular term, but the feminist label, in fact, is not.



Midge Decter

Before I begin, I want to say that I was positively repelled by the spectacle of Ladies' Night at the Republican Convention—Lynn Martin, Marilyn Quayle, and the Great White Mother. Not that I blame any of these three. Each taken by herself and on some other occasion would have been fine, but it was so clearly a political handler's idea. You could almost hear him, or them, saying, "Let's hit the family values button. The Democrats are vulnerable on that one, and the American people are with us on it."

The anti-Hillary night, you might call it. Now, don't get me wrong, anti-Hillary is important and right. It is more right and more important than anti-Bill. She is the quintessential girl radical. She is a type that if you know her at all, you know her like the back of your hand. She is the one who has been poisoning the wells of colleges and graduate schools and professional schools and foundations and municipal governments across the land.

Still, I found the Republican program devoted to countering her infuriating in the extreme. Why? Because like the bunch of "don't get it" that Mr. Bush's handlers are, they set up the debate so it seemed to be an argument between women who pursue careers and women who stay home, as Hillary herself so eloquently put it, and bake cookies. This is not the argument that divides American women, if it ever was, which I doubt. Leaving aside the question of abortion, which is beginning, unfortunately, to obscure many other questions [abortion in any case is not, NOT, a women's issue, for God's sake. It is everybody's issue], the argument is not between career and homemaking, it is between accepting the human obligations and responsibilities of being a woman or spending your life whining about them and demanding that society or the government or men or your daddy or your mommy or somebody or something relieve you of them.

Defining Obligations. The human obligation of a woman is to look after men and children, whether as a wife and mother, which is usual, or in some other capacity. I was much interested to hear Karlyn saying that the polls show that women tend to be more risk-averse than men. They are supposed to be more risk-averse than men, just as the human obligation of a man is to protect, defend, and support women and children. The declaration that it is no fair that you have to look after men and children is not a demand for equality as a woman, but the demand to be permitted to remain a child—as is by the same token the refusal to protect, defend, and support women and children on the part of men, which is behavior coming to be rather shockingly common these days, even among the young men of enlightened society.

Anyway, Marilyn Quayle has a career, alright. No lady lawyer or Wall Street broker has work that is more anxiety inducing, and no key punch operator has work more tedious than being a good wife to an American politician. Any perks or bits of glory that come her way she more than earns. O.K., now I got that off my chest.

But, I don't want to talk about work anyway, I want to talk about sex. And here we are. I thought this morning as I was coming here that it is thirty years since Betty Friedan, that well-known pop-sociologist, set the world trembling with her wonderful book, *The Feminine Mystique*. And it is not many years fewer than that that I opened up the *New York Times* one morning and saw a photograph which has been haunting me ever since. News photos are very important. They are often more important than the stories that accompany them, because you can see things with your eyes even if the reporter doesn't understand them.

This news photo accompanied a story about how the Columbia University dormitories had been sexually integrated. There had been great demand on the part of young women—I would say “girls,” but even I have been brainwashed sufficiently not to use that term anymore—and they had demanded the right to the integrated dorms. They didn't see why they should be in sexually segregated dorms. Columbia's were, I think, among the first of the college dormitories that were so integrated. A lot of older men I knew at that time were very envious. They were envious of the great sexual revolution that integrating the college dorms bespoke. One of the great poets of our time, Phillip Larkin, had this wonderful poem about how the sexual revolution began in 1963, “between the end of the Lady Chatterly ban and the Beatles' first LP/ Too Late For Me.” And so everybody said, as they had said also in the late '60s, when women were walking around with skirts barely covering their crotches, had thrown away their brassieres and were sashaying around, “Oh boy, this is really hot stuff.” And I kept saying to my husband, “You men think that they are saying they are making themselves available. That is why you are all so full of envy. Well, let me assure you that this sashaying around the way they do is a gesture that signifies quite the opposite. What they are telling you is that they don't care.”

In Control. Well, back to this photograph, a photograph of all these girls lined up—oops, I said girl—and the look on their faces was a look containing equal parts of triumph, aggression, and steely determination. And I thought to myself, “Anybody who thinks that this means jolly times for the boys and men has got to have his head examined.” They may be available or they may not be available, but that is hardly relevant to what is really going on here. Look at their faces; they are saying, “We are now in control.” And what greater power can you put into the hands of a young girl than to move her into the college dorm of young men. Then the message is: Look, but don't touch; and, whether anything follows from this or not is entirely my say-so, no longer yours.

That was the first harbinger of what subsequently was to become something called acquaintance rape. Acquaintance rape was at first defined as being raped by someone you know, and it quickly got to be defined as any form of sexual encounter between two people who are acquainted when the young woman—she might be naked and she might be in bed with him—has decided, either at the last minute or even subsequently, that she didn't actually want to do that. That is now called rape. She is in control.

Well, nowadays the perfect exemplifier of what I am talking about is no longer those college dorms, it is now the armed services of the United States of America—particularly the Navy, because in the Navy people live in very close quarters, like college dormitories. And once again, America's young men, in the name of something called equality—which isn't equality at all, it is complete feminine power, sexual power—are now being thrown together under circumstances in which they are supposed to live in close quarters, but nothing is supposed to happen, or if it does, it will happen only on the say-so of the young women involved.

Now, there is a difference between men and women. It used to be that in the 1960s, of course, we had to fight over that point. I don't think anybody is fighting over the point anymore. At least we have made that much progress. Men and women are not the same. Young men are prepared to have sex at any time, under any circumstances, if they can. That is their nature. And it is not the nature of young women. So, you take young men, you try to mold them into being participants in a fighting

force. They are people who are supposed to be sent to take orders, to risk their lives, to kill if necessary. And while you are doing this, you emasculate them—and I don't think that is too strong a term—by forcing them to live in close quarters with women who are supposed to be not women. And between the extreme of women on sailing ships and the beginning in that co-ed dorm, terrible things have been going on.

Terrible Dislocation. And the evidence for this is something else that interests me very greatly, and that is the proliferation of personal ads in respectable publications. It used to be that men who were advertising for women, or women who were advertising for men, confined their advertisements to certain, shall we say, marginal journals where it was understood that what they were generally advertising was some very special erotic taste which they were happy to fulfill with any stranger who would write them a letter.

This is no longer so. These are no longer “swingers” looking for other swingers, people looking for group sex, people looking for kinks. These are perfectly proper, respectable people advertising in very respectable publications, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Republic*, all over the place, even now in a village paper like the *East Hampton Star*. And the ads go something like this: White male lawyer in his 30s, unmarried, loves to have a good time, loves music, skiing or whatnot, seeking young, white female for romantic involvement. And the women say, lively, attractive, 30ish female—white divorced female; white single female — looking for man, preferably music lover, no smoking, and so on. They are reintroducing the institution of the marriage broker, that is what they are doing. All these personal ads are marriage brokers—send your picture, write me a letter.

And indeed, I have seen it said on television broadcasts that many people have met this way and have finally got together this way. And I say to myself, “How is it possible that enlightened, educated, well brought up, well-heeled, attractive, lively, interesting people are looking for mates this way?” I don't have a detailed answer, but the one thing that I am saying is that the surrender of this society to the bogus notion of sexual equality has produced the most terrible dislocation. It is a shame. It is a crime that perfectly nice young people should go through such awful times finding one another. And everybody in this room who is young and unmarried knows perfectly well what I am talking about. There are no rules of engagement, there is no flirtation, there is no anything. There might be a kind of absent-minded bed-hopping, although I think there is less of that than there used to be. But there are no tributes that women pay to men and that men are permitted to pay to women, and more. And this is that whole wonderful game which was intended for each side to pay some respect to the needs and differences of the other, which enabled them to get together and make a treaty, which is a marriage, a kind of negotiated armistice, which is very nice and which is needed by both sides. There is no way to translate this into a legislative program, except negative, except in the sense of it is time for us all to start telling the truth to one another and resisting the nonsense.



Linda Chavez

Thank you Kate and thank you to both Karlyn and Midge for their comments. My friends always tease me that we neo-conservatives obviously share some common brain that is kept in New York City somewhere because we think so much alike. And I must admit that as I listened to Midge talking I thought, “Well, now she has said everything that I was going to say, what am I left with?”

I am always fascinated by the question, What do women want. I can never hear the question without thinking of Samuel Gompers when he was asked what labor wanted. He had a simple, eloquent, one word answer, and that was “more.” And certainly, if you look at the women's liberation of the 1960s, what women seemed to be asking for was more—more money, more sex, and, I think, more

freedom. I think they got all three of those things. But ultimately, especially with that last—more freedom—has also come increasing responsibility for women.

Has the bargain gone well for women? When women finally got more money, more sex, and more freedom did they end up benefitting from that? Because, I think if you were to ask that same question today to the average woman, you would still get the same answer: They want more, but more of different things. They want more time with their children. They want more respect, some of what Midge was talking about. And most important, they want more commitment from men.

Change and Responsibility. The liberation that occurred in the 1960s was not all bad. I certainly am a beneficiary of that movement. When I moved in 1972 to Washington a woman with my background would likely have gotten a job as a secretary on Capitol Hill. Because of some of the changes that were occurring in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was able to move into a professional role. When I went to buy my first house in 1973 I found out from the bank that my salary would not be counted toward qualifying for the mortgage, and therefore I had to seek private financing in order to buy that house. The same would not be true today; we have something called the Equal Credit Act. Certainly in terms of equal pay for equal work women have benefitted from changes that occurred in the 1960s.

But with all of those changes, and particularly with the movement of women into the workplace, has come an enormous amount of responsibility that I think women are now bearing up under, but not altogether well. In the 1950s and the 1960s a lot of women, particularly well educated, upper middle class women, were saying that they wanted the opportunity not just to have families, but also to have careers. For the young woman graduating from college today there is no longer any choice. Women today simply are not free to choose to stay home.

And it doesn't have, in my view, a whole lot to do with the economy. We constantly hear that the reason women work is that they have to work, that their salaries are needed. And I would venture to say that if you were to look very closely at the lifestyle that was led by the average couple in the 1950s and the lifestyle led by the average couple in the 1990s, you would see enormous differences. Yes, women have to work and their salaries are needed for their families, but except for a portion of women who are at the bottom of the social and economic scale, most middle-class women today are not working to put food on the table. They are working to be able to buy a bigger house. They are working to be able to afford a second car, to be able to afford all of those time-saver appliances that we now have in our kitchens. And in fact, the whole explosion in the material revolution that has taken place in the last half of the 20th century is, in large part, what women work for today. Those things that we buy and that we now feel that we need were things that were simply unavailable to women earlier in the century. So, I don't think it is fair to say that all women are in fact working simply as a matter of necessity. Certainly single mothers, certainly women whose husbands are at the low end of the social and economic spectrum are working for that, but the large bulk of middle-class women are working, by and large, because the social pressure is there to work.

If you go to college you are expected to go out into the workforce. And in fact, there is very little acceptance of a woman who chooses to do otherwise. So while we have gotten greater freedom in certain ways, and we certainly have now the freedom to go into more non-traditional careers, we have also lost a certain amount of freedom.

One of the other ways in which we have lost is that for all of the ads with fathers helping out in the kitchen and diapering the babies and everything else that goes on, any woman with children knows that the primary responsibility for the care of children still rests with the mother. I happen to be fortunate to be married to a man who has been more helpful than virtually anyone I know in terms of raising our children. He does take the kids to the orthodontist and he does take them to the pediatrician, but I have to make the appointment, I have to remind him that it needs to be done. And

I think that is true in every single family, that the major burden, the major responsibility for the care of those children still rest with the women.

Enormous Strains. And so you have women who are now out in the workplace who are not just holding jobs, they have careers. They become very competitive; they want to be on that fast track and they want the promotion, they want to be managers; they just aren't satisfied with a 9 to 5 job. And so you have women who are under all of the same pressures that men have been under for years in terms of advancing their careers, but who also must come home to the responsibility of children. That has placed an enormous physical and emotional strain on women today, and I think women are beginning to rebel against that.

But the most important change that has taken place since the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s has been in the sexual arena. Here I would like to pick up a little bit on what Midge has said, perhaps maybe to expand it. Much of the sexual liberation in my view has been very bad for women. It has been bad for women because it has meant sex without commitment. We have thousands of years of civilization as our guide to the way in which families should best be organized.

In fact the deferral of sex until marriage and the maintenance of sex within marriage has been a civilizing experience. And I remember back to the early 1980s when Ronald Reagan had the courage to suggest that women were civilizing influences and that without women's civilizing influences, men, I think he said, would still be off in caves and in loin cloths. In fact, that has been true for the tens of thousands of years that we have experienced civilization. Women have, in fact, been able to exercise a control on men's much more aggressive impulses. And women have been able to do that, by and large, through the medium of sex. They are using sex as a method of control. In the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s I think women gave up on that very important control method.

And so now what we have is women who give sex without commitment, and we have an explosion in out-of-wedlock births, and we have an explosion in divorce, where men abandon women as they get older and less physically attractive to seek prettier, younger women who can satisfy their sexual needs. That, I think, has been an enormous problem for women. We also have, as a result of that, the pursuit by women of eternal youth and beauty. We now no longer are allowed to grow old gracefully. Any evening you can turn on the television and see before you what women are expected to look like, and what women are expected to look like into their 50s and 60s. Now, we all have to look like Cher when we turn 50. No one bothers to mention that it costs a lot of money to have all of the things done to you that Cher had done to her in order to keep her looking like that. But that is, in fact, our model.

Looking to Government. I am not at all surprised when I hear Karlyn Keene talk about women's greater trust in and reliance on government. I think women feel that they have been more or less abandoned by men and therefore they are looking for someone to supply those things that in a traditional American society men were there for. Men were there to provide for your security. Men were there to take care of you, to shelter you. Now, men are passing in and out of women's lives. Men are not necessarily there for the long haul. And who is there for the long haul and what institution do women have some control over? That institution is the political institution; it is the government. Women can vote. Women can get from government the things that they once relied on their spouses for. And I think that has a very important role to play. And that is why women are looking to things like government-funded day care. If women can't expect that they have the freedom to stay home after a child is born when their husbands want them back out bringing in the paycheck soon after the birth of a child, because that is going to lead to more material things for the family, it is not surprising that you are seeing women wanting to push for legislation to allow them those benefits that were once a very normal part of American family life.

And again, these institutions, these rules go back thousands of years. Many of those rules have simply gone by the wayside in the last twenty years. And women are finding that they are in a very precarious position. When I was growing up you didn't go to a man's apartment. You didn't go into a boy's dorm room if you didn't expect to have sex with that man. That simply was not done. It was socially unacceptable. If someone saw you go into a room and close the door and you were in there for three hours, they expected that what was taken place behind those closed doors was sex. And if you didn't want it to be thought that that was going on, you simply didn't do it. There were all sorts of informal rules that governed those relationships.

Today we don't have those rules anymore. And I think that what we are finding is that women are no longer able to exercise that kind of control and influence over men. Despite what Midge says, I think women are not quite as powerful, and even feminists are not quite as powerful as perhaps they thought. And so what we see is a yearning for someone, something to step in and put the rules back in place. But since organized religion is unacceptable these days, and we don't want to talk about something so old fashioned as morality, what we look to now are government and the courts and the legislature. And so we have anti-pornography laws that are being pushed now, not by the women's temperance society, but by feminist organizations. And we have feminist organizations that are trying to set up rules governing consensual sex, and we have sexual harassment laws that govern even the kind of discourse that can take place between men and women.

Losing Battle. I think it is a very desperate grasping at straws to try and restore some of the civility that at one time took place in our society. Such a thing at the Tailhook incident with the officers from the Navy, I think, would have been inconceivable twenty or thirty years ago. Look at the phrase "officer and a gentleman." Gentlemen do not behave that way toward ladies. But we no longer have gentlemen or ladies in this society. We no longer have those rules and so, in their place, we have something called sexual harassment codes.

And I think in the end it is going to be a losing battle. I think in the end we will either become a society that gives up on the notion of certain kinds of civil liberties in order to try and control thought through legislation, or we will have to go back to our roots and go back to the old fashioned mechanisms of those very moral structures and those very social institutions that exercise that kind of control. Because there is no doubt in my mind that what women are asking more than anything else in our society today is more respect for who they are as women.

