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AOC and the daughter defence

Invoking daughters to deflect criticism has been used throughout history to excuse a host of bad behaviour

Brett Kavanaugh invoked it. Mitch McConnell used it too. Matt Damon and Ben Affleck have each talked about it, and this week, Representative Ted Yoho joined their ranks: He, too, is now a member of the having-a-daughter-makes-me-an-ally-to-women — or at the very least, should-excuse-my-bad-behaviour — club.

'Having been married for 45 years with two daughters, I'm very cognisant of language,' Representative Yoho said in a speech on the House floor this week, denying that he called Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the freshman Congresswoman from New York, a 'fucking bitch' after a confrontation on the steps of the Capitol.

Mr Yoho later expressed regret for the 'abrupt manner of the conversation,' in which he told Ms Ocasio-Cortez that her statements about poverty and crime in New York City were 'disgusting.' But, he noted, 'I cannot apologise for my passion or for loving my God, my family and my country.'

On Thursday, in a speech on the House floor that has since gone viral — in which she read the vulgarity into the Congressional record — Ms. Ocasio-Cortez said, 'I am someone's daughter too.' She said she'd planned to ignore the insults — it's 'just another day' as a woman, she said — but changed her mind after Mr Yoho decided to bring his wife and daughters into the fray.

Our culture is full of platitudes about fathers and daughters: the Hallmark card, the weeping dad at the wedding. But invoking daughters and wives to deflect criticism is a particular kind of political trope — and one that's been used throughout history to 'excuse a host of bad behaviour,' said the historian Barbara Berg.

The First-Daughter Effect

The love a man has for the female members of his family, particularly his offspring, is presumed to have special power — to humanise the other half of the population, to allow him to imagine the world his daughter will inhabit. Sometimes, in fact, this happens. Other times, the Daughter Excuse comes across mostly as cynical ploy.

'As if familial affiliation alone equals enlightened attitudes towards women,' said Susan Douglas, a professor of communication and media at the University of Michigan. 'It's like claiming "I have a Black friend," as if that makes you anti-racist.'

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There is social science that's shown there is *something* to being the father of a daughter.

In a study called 'The First-Daughter Effect,' Elizabeth Sharrow, an associate professor of public policy and history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and her colleagues, determined that fathering daughters — and firstborn daughters, in particular — indeed played a role in making men's attitudes toward gender equality more progressive, particularly when it came to policies like equal pay or sexual harassment protocols. The researchers also determined that those dads of firstborn daughters were, in 2016, more likely to support Hillary Clinton or a fictional female congressional candidate delivering a similar pitch.

"Our argument is not that it is genetics or biology, but that it is proximity," said Dr. Sharrow. In other words: The daughters help the fathers see the problems they may have previously dismissed.

Witness basketball star Stephen Curry, who has written about how "the idea of women's equality has become a little more personal for me, lately, and a little more real," since having a daughter.

Or Dick Cheney, whose views on same-sex marriage shifted earlier than many might have expected because of his daughter, who is gay.

And yet.

Using daughters as 'props'

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It's also different from fathers using them as 'props,' as Dr Berg puts it, to emphasise their alignment with women's causes — or, by contrast, their disgust over behaviours perceived to be in opposition to them.

Consider Justice Kavanaugh, who — during his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee about allegations of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford — spoke repeatedly of his daughters (as well as his wife and mother) and noted that coaching his daughter's basketball team was what he loved 'more than anything I've ever done in my whole life' — as if loving coaching and allegedly treating women badly as a teenager are mutually exclusive.

'Men have often pointed to their relationships with and love for *some* women — especially wives and daughters — to combat claims that they have mistreated *other* women,' said Kelly Dittmar, a scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. 'We have seen this both inside and outside of politics, especially when men are subject to accusations of sexual harassment and assault.'

What makes a decent man?

In the wake of the 2016 reports on comments made by Donald Trump on the now-infamous 'Access Hollywood' tape, a host of fathers-of-daughters came out to condemn the behaviour. Mr McConnell noted that 'as the father of three daughters' he believed that Mr Trump 'needs to apologise directly to women and girls everywhere,' while Mitt Romney said that the comments 'demean our wives and daughters.' (It is perhaps worth noting that Mr Trump, too, has daughters.)

Women, too, have at times invoked men's daughters — and other female relatives — in trying to appeal to some men.

Similarly, in response to revelations of sexual misconduct by Harvey Weinstein, both Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, who had worked with the disgraced Hollywood producer, expressed their disgust on behalf of their female offspring. We 'need to do better at protecting

> our friends, sisters, co-workers and daughters,' Mr Affleck said on Twitter, while Mr Damon explained that 'as the father of four daughters, this is the kind of sexual predation that keeps me up at night.'

Women, too, have at times invoked men's daughters — and other female relatives — in trying to appeal to some men. When asked about Mr Yoho's behaviour, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said: 'What's so funny is, you'd say to them, "Do you not have a daughter? Do you not have a mother? Do you not have a sister? Do you not have a wife? What makes you think that you can be so" — and this is the word I use for them — "condescending, in addition to being disrespectful?"'

The caveat, of course, is the qualification. 'Qualifying your outrage against misogyny as due to your role as a father or husband implies that, absent those roles, you would be either unaware of or unconcerned,' said Dr Dittmar.

Or as Ms Ocasio-Cortez put it: 'Having a daughter does not make a man decent. Having a wife does not make a decent man. Treating people with dignity and respect makes a decent man.' Why should daughters still have to be a prerequisite to respect?

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Jessica Bennett
New York City

Jessica Bennett is a New York Times editor at large covering gender and culture.