

HE'S A STUD,
SHE'S A SLUT
AND 49 OTHER
DOUBLE STANDARDS
EVERY WOMAN
SHOULD KNOW 

JESSICA VALENTI

Author of Full Frontal Feminism

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JESSICA VALENTI



SEAL PRESS

To the readers of Feministing.com, for inspiring me every day.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, I had a reputation—a bad one. (You know, a “slutty” one.) I wasn’t quite sure how I became seen as the promiscuous girl in school, since I was definitely not getting any more action than my girlfriends. It felt like the reputation—which I really didn’t find out about until well into my senior year—had materialized out of nowhere. And I was confused.

Maybe it was because I went to a kind of dorky math and science magnet school where anyone who even talked about sex was labeled sexually active? Perhaps it was because I had so many guy friends that I hung around with? Or maybe it was because I was a little more, ahem, developed than the other gals? I wasn’t quite sure.

Looking back, I realize that it could have been any of those things, or nothing. Most likely, it was because I had a bit of a potty mouth (shocking, I know), told dirty jokes, and was a louder, more opinionated girl than some of my peers. I know better now, and realize that labeling girls “sluts” is a pretty common silencing tactic. After all, there’s no better way to silence a woman than to call her a whore!

But that was the first sexist double standard I became acutely aware of—one that affected my life, and, maybe more important, really pissed me off. I was upset not only that people thought things about me that weren’t true, but that the double standard existed in the first place. So fucking what if I *had* slept with every guy in my grade? Why would that make me a bad person? It just seemed so illogical to me, yet it was so accepted. While I didn’t consider myself a feminist until college, when I took my first women’s studies class, I think it was this sense of just simple unfairness that really got me started down my feminist path.

Because everyday sexism is something that we can all relate to. If you’re a feminist or not, Democrat or Republican, there are certain things that all women recognize—and are pissed off about.

After I wrote my first book, *Full Frontal Feminism*, it was difficult to know what to write next. I got such amazing responses from young women who read the book—women from thirteen to sixty!—I didn’t want to let them down with my next one.

One email I got was from a sixteen-year-old Middle Eastern woman living in Michigan who was happy to read something from another young feminist. Another teen, a fourteen-year-old from Mozambique, was pleased that she finally had something that she could use to “get across to my somewhat closed-minded friends for years.” The notes that affected me the most, though, were the ones that inspired action. A twenty-one-year-old African American woman from California sent me a message through MySpace about how she faces racism and sexism at work every day: “I thought ideas and feelings like the ones your book and blog have shown me only existed in my hometown of Oakland and S.F. I now want to start a young feminist movement in my community.”

I was so touched that these women would take the time to write me, and that the book made such an impact on their lives. . . . It was very overwhelming and it still feels like a huge responsibility (or

I'm flattered to have!).

And while the notes I got from women came from all different parts of the world, and came from women all across the spectrum in terms of class, race, sexuality, and politics, the one thing they all had in common was that they talked about how sexism affected their everyday lives. Whether it was through sexual harassment or workplace racism or just the struggles they had in school or at home taking care of their kids—it was the day-to-day injustices that women talked about.

So I figured, why not go back to basics? Go back to that place when I hadn't even started to think about feminism yet—but where it was still impossible not to think about and notice day-to-day unfairness and injustice. No matter how anyone feels about feminism, there are certain inequalities and double standards that are impossible to ignore or argue with.

I'm hoping this book will be a fun (but informative!) handbook on those everyday inequities women still face. Because from the boardroom to the bedroom, women are still getting the short end of the stick. Whether it's the sexual double standard that led to me (and so many other women) being labeled a slut, or the work double standard that calls women "bitches" for being good at their job, we still have a long way to go.

This book is for any feminist—or non-feminist!—who is sick of people saying that everything is fine and dandy. This is a book that you'll be able to whip out, whether at school, a bar, or the office, to show the skeptics that sexism is still alive and well—but that there are women out there doing something about it! Think of it as a quick reference guide to everyday sexism. Only funnier.

I hope this book inspires action. I hope that you'll carry it around and use it to battle the sexists in your lives. But most of all, I hope that you leave this book not feeling downtrodden about how pervasive sexism is, but instead energized to do something about it!

That said, I just want to say thanks to all the feminists out there—especially you new feminists!—for doing the hard work, every day, of telling the truth about sexism. I know it's not always easy, but it's changing lives. You all are inspiring.



HE'S A STUD, SHE'S A SLUT

IF YOU HAVE A VAGINA, chances are someone has called you a slut at least once in your life. There's just no getting around it.

I remember the first time I heard the word “slut”—I was in my fifth-grade science class. A certain little girl (terror) named Eleena had been making my life miserable all year in a way that only mean little girls can. She had turned all of my girlfriends against me, spread rumors and the like. She walked up to me at my desk and said, “You called me a slut.” I had absolutely no idea what the word meant. I just sat there, silently. She repeated herself: “You called me a slut, but you're the slut.” I don't remember how long after that I found out exactly what “slut” meant, but I knew it had to be terrible and I knew I didn't want to be it.

Naturally, I'd be called a slut many times over later in life—not unlike most girls. I was called a slut when my boobs grew faster than others'. I was called a slut when I had a boyfriend (even though we weren't having sex). I was called a slut when I didn't have a boyfriend and kissed a random boy at a party. I was called a “slut” when I had the nerve to talk about sex. I was called a slut when I wore a bikini on a weekend trip with high school friends. It seems the word “slut” can be applied to any activity that doesn't include knitting, praying, or sitting perfectly still lest any sudden movements be deemed whorish.

Despite the ubiquity of “slut,” where you won't hear it is in relation to men. Men can't be sluts. Sure, someone will occasionally call a guy “a dog,” but men simply aren't judged like women are when it comes to sexuality. (And if they are, they're judged in a positive way!) Men who have a lot of sexual partners are studs, Casanovas, pimps, and players. Never sluts. In fact, when I just did a Google search for “male sluts,” the first result I got was *She Male Sluts DVD!* I know, should have seen that coming. The point is, there isn't even a word—let alone a concept—to signify a male slut.

But it makes sense when you think about what the purpose of the word “slut” is: controlling women through shame and humiliation. Women's bodies are *always* the ones that are being vied over for control—whether it's rape, reproductive rights, or violence against women, it's our bodies that are the battleground, not men's.

And if you don't think it's about control, consider this little bit of weirdness. The most recent incarnation of the sexual double standard being played out in a seriously creepy way is through Purity Balls. These promlike events basically have fathers take their daughters to a big fancy dance where they promise their daddy their virginity. Likewise, the father promises to be the "keeper" of his daughter's virginity until he decides to give it to her future husband. Where are the Purity Balls for men, you ask? Oh, they're there, but they're about controlling women too! Called Integrity Balls, these events focus on men not having sex because they'd be defiling someone else's "future wife." Not because men need to be pure or be virgins—but because they need to make sure *women* are virgins. Unbelievable, really.

Outside of the feminist implications of the sexual double standard, the slut/stud conundrum has always been my favorite because it just makes no sense logically. Why is a woman less of a person, or (my favorite) "dirty," because she has sex? (Heterosexual sex, that is; somehow lesbian sex isn't "real.") Does a penis have some bizarre dirty-making power that I'm unaware of? Every time I have sex, do I lose a little bit of my moral compass? "Sorry to mug you, Grandma, but I had sex twice this week!"

And let's face it—the slut stigma isn't just dangerous to our "reputations" or to some weird-and-ancient notion of purity. How many times has a rape been discounted because a woman was deemed a slut? How many times are women called whores while their partners beat them? How often are women's sexual histories used against them in workplace harassment cases? The sexual double standard is a lot more dangerous than we'd like to think.

So... what to do?

First and foremost, stop calling other women sluts! It doesn't behoove us to bash each other or gals. And speak out when you hear men do the same. I'll never forget in college overhearing a conversation that my boyfriend's roommates were having. They both had slept with the same girl over the course of the year—they called her a whore and made a joke about her vagin being "loose." I asked them why she was the bad person in this scenario—after all, they had had casual sex with her, too. They couldn't provide an answer, but that didn't stop them from continuing to laugh. I always regretted not saying anything more. Outside of calling ourselves and others out on perpetuating the double standard, it's a hard battle. But I think if we recognize the hypocrisy of the stud/slut nonsense when we see it—whether it's in an anti-choice law or a movie that makes women who have sex look like deviants—we're on the right road.

(Random true story: When I was in my early twenties, I was watching a documentary on anorexia and saw my childhood tormentor, Eleena, talking about her terrible eating disorder and how she cut herself as a teen. Just something to remember when you think back on the kids who were cruel to you—they were in pain, too.)



HE'S CHILL, SHE'S ON THE PILL

IN MY SEX-HAVING LIFETIME, I've been on the Pill, used the NuvaRing, condoms, and female condoms, and considered getting an IUD just so I wouldn't have to worry about birth control for another five years or so. I've taken emergency contraception. The job of being responsible, at the end of the day, has always lain with me. Because I'm a woman. It's our responsibility to have safe sex: birth control pills, diaphragms, spermicides—shit, we even have to convince men to wear condoms!—and say it's crap.

There's no doubt that women will always have a disproportionate amount of responsibility when it comes to sex, because we're the ones who get pregnant—and if we do get pregnant it's going to be up to us to decide what to do about it. But the way that birth control is automatically considered a woman's domain is just irksome, not only from a theoretical feminist perspective—why should it only be up to us!?!—but also from a practical one.

Because being the responsible party in a sexual relationship doesn't come without costs. Birth control has always cost me money, but recently I'm spending over \$50 a month (I don't have health insurance) to make sure I don't get knocked up. And I know I'm not the only one who is breaking the bank.

I used to long for my college days, when being on the Pill would only cost me a few dollars a month. But those days are long gone, and young women today are getting totally screwed. Birth control prices on college campuses are literally doubling and tripling. (But not condoms, of course—just the kind that the ladies use.) Drug companies that used to sell college contraceptives at a discount—which is why you could get a \$50 pack of pills for \$12—have stopped offering the discount. And women are pissed, rightfully. The best quote I heard about this increase in price came from a twenty-two-year-old at the University of Iowa who said, “This is the one thing that many females on campus are getting from student health. . . . It felt like we were a target.” ¹ Ya think?

And the cost of bearing birth control responsibility isn't just monetary. Birth control has long been used against certain women—women of color, immigrants, and low-income women—as a way to control them. There are groups that put up billboards in low-income, minority communities urging

women to get sterilized for cash (seriously), and a long history of sterilizing women because on certain (white) women having babies is considered desirable.

Unfortunately, it's not only the onus of being protected that's on women, it's also the stigma attached to having sex. Men can buy condoms without getting a lecture or a problem—but women who go to the pharmacy for birth control are often refused or asked about their marital status. Can you even *imagine* that happening to a man? And when was the last time you saw conservative groups up in arms about condoms being available in schools? Hell no. Because they couldn't give a shit about whether guys have sex or not. But allowing women to take control of their reproductive destinies? No way. There have been all sorts of protests just in the last year over birth control pills and patches being made available to young women. So not only is it up to us to make sure we're protected—we have to jump through all sorts of hoops to make it happen!

So what about the men? You would think that men would be eager to take on extra responsibility—having control over your reproductive future is always a good thing, after all. A common anti-feminist argument against child support, for example, is that women constantly trick men into getting them pregnant (sure they do). Guess what, guys—if you used a condom every time you had sex, and took on some responsibility for your sex life, you would never have to worry about something like that.

When I've asked folks (friends, foes, and even feminists) about the birth control disparity, I've heard countless times that it's not *their* fault that all of the contraceptive options are available to women. But recent studies show that the lack of a male birth control pill, which has been reported to be on its way for years now, isn't because of science holdups—it's societal obstacles. The man who originally developed the male pill, Carl Djerassi, says they stopped working on it because men just wouldn't use it: "It would be possible to make a male pill today. We know how hormones work and we could use the same principles that are used to make the female [pill]. . . . The problem is that men are afraid to lose their virility. Even if taking a pill carries only a remote chance of impotence, they won't take the chance." (Right. Because it's not like women undertake any health risks at all using countless levels of hormones, things stuck up our chocha, and the like.)

So... what to do?

If you're straight and sexually active, make sure that your partner is taking on as much responsibility as you are. Use condoms. Split the costs of all your birth control—after all, he's benefiting from it, too! At the end of the day, the birth control double standard exists for one reason—sexism. The idea behind the reality of fewer BC options for men is that sex and reproduction are all about women. We can't let them be.



HE'S ROUGH, SHE'S DAINTY

WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, I had a play kitchen set—it was tin and looked super real. I also had a tea set and a shit ton of dolls. But, thanks to my hippie parents, I also had a Thundercats glowing sword, toy robots, and multiple racing car sets (those were my favorite). And while I was acutely aware that there were “boys’ toys” and “girls’ toys,” I remember always appreciating my parents telling me that girls could play with boys’ toys and vice versa. (Especially because I took some shenanigans from schoolmates due to my penchant for swords and robots.) I never would have thought that twenty-three years later children would have the same kind of gendered toys that I grew up with.

You really don’t need to look much further than the nonsense directed at our children to see a ton of double standards at play, not to mention the way that sexist socialization starts early.

Take toys, for example. You can still find the “girls’” aisle in a toy store just by looking for the blinding pink that adorns everything. Feministing.com blogger Vanessa (and my sis) took a look at the toys sold in superstore Target and found some predictable, though no less nauseating, trends: Girls’ toys are supposed to “make her sweet dreams come true,” with featured sections, the first being “Kitchen and Play Food,” along with “Dolls and Accessories” and “Horse Play Sets.” Boys’ toys “let his imagination run wild” with “Cars, Trucks, and Trains,” “Building and Construction,” “Tech Toys and Kids’ Electronics,” “Vehicles and Radio Control,” and “Science.”

But it’s not just the pink-is-for-girls, blue-is-for-boys trend that’s problematic. It’s what these toys are, and what they’re telling our kids from a very early age.

Take the Fashion Fever Shopping Boutique, a Barbie toy that has a pink credit card swiper and a credit card so that little girls can “buy” outfits for their dolls. The television commercial for the toy features a little girl saying, “And you never run out of money!” (You know, just like in real life. Sigh.) Creating good little consumers one toy at a time! Never mind that young women in the United States are deeper in credit card debt than perhaps any other group in the country.¹

Or Playskool’s new Rose Petal Cottage—the tagline for this girls’ playhouse is “Where dreams have room to grow.” That is, of course, assuming your daughter’s dreams consist of baking muffins, rocking a cradle, and doing laundry. The commercial for the toy is totally disturbing, with lyrics from

the Rose Petal Cottage song saying: “I love when my laundry gets so clean / Taking care of my home is a dream, dream, dream!” If that’s not bad enough, when the little girl in the commercial puts clothes in her laundry machine, the narrator notes the cottage is a place “she can entertain her imagination”! Girls’ imaginations should consist of laundry and baking. Awesome. Compare that with Tonka, whose new commercials claim that “boys are different” and that their trucks are built “Tonka tough,” and I think you’ll see what I’m getting at. Not to mention the racism built into so many toys especially for girls. Most dolls sold are white and blond, and those that are supposed to be “ethnic” have overwhelmingly Caucasian features.

And if toys aren’t telling little girls that they should grow up to be happy homemakers, they’re telling them to be sexual. Seriously. It was just 2006 when Target took shit for selling padded bras for girls as young as six. A spokesperson from Bratz, who makes the “bralettes,” said “the idea of the padding is for girls to be discreet as they develop.” Um, last time I checked, six-year-olds had nothing to be discreet about. British superstore Tesco even got called out for selling toy stripper poles in the children’s toy section. The kit is advertised on its site as saying, “Unleash the sex kitten inside. . . . Simply extend the Peekaboo pole inside the tube, slip on the sexy tunes, and away you go!” Charming.

Then there’s clothing. If you’ve ever shopped for a little girl—especially a baby girl—I challenge you to find something that (a) isn’t pink and (b) doesn’t say something like “princess” or “diva” or “drama queen.” Not possible. Jane Roper, on her blog, Baby Squared, says of the clothing conundrum: “I guess some people find it funny. Like: Ha, ha—an innocent baby girl can’t be a spoiled pain in the ass! So it’s funny to call her one! Because, really, she won’t be a spoiled pain in the ass until she’s at least twelve! And if she is one then, that’s fine! Because that’s just what it means to be an empowered young woman in America today! Getting what you want—whether it’s shoes or clothes or an iPod or a chihuahua or your own reality show or whatever. God bless America! Ha, ha, ha! Princess! How cute! And how sad. And I haven’t even touched on child beauty pageants, television shows, and a ton of other stuff directed at children.

So... what to do?

Don’t buy your kids sexist toys! Which I know isn’t easy, I assure you. Or if you *must* buy the goddamn Rose Petal Cottage, get some Tonka trucks too. (Though it’s probably better that you don’t support toy companies that rely on sexism to sell their products!) If you’re looking for cool, not-all-white dolls, check out Karito Kids, which features girls from all over the world. (Think American Girl but cooler and international.) Go to parent blogs dedicated to anti-sexism and anti-racism for ideas. And for goodness’ sake, stay away from toy credit cards.



HE'S A HERO, SHE'S A DAMSEL

DESPITE MY PARENTS' PROTESTATIONS, I must admit that I'm far from perfect. I'm loud and sarcastic, and when I'm pissed I can be a cold bitch. Like all people, I have my flaws. Which is why I've never, ever wanted a guy to put me on a pedestal—if you're on a pedestal, you have a long way to fall. And no one can live up to the expectations that some folks—in fact, a lot of folks—have for women. That we're virgins, Madonnas, mothers, little girls, perfect angels to be protected. Naturally, viewing women this way sets up a very dangerous dynamic—because no one is perfect, and when women transgress, they get punished. (You don't have to look much further than the virgin/whore complex to figure that out.)

And while the whole woman-on-a-pedestal thing is often shrouded in ideas about romance, it's anything but. Because notions of pedestals and chivalry operate under the assumption that women are inferior. While holding women up to high standards may not immediately seem like it's degrading—after all, right now the idea of girls being “princesses” and “treated like queens” is all the rage (just watch *Bridezillas*)—what it's actually doing is saying that women are like children, not fully formed people. We have to be protected. We have to be coddled. We have to be treated with kid gloves. Sorry, but my idea of romance isn't being babied.

Now, when people think “chivalry,” they think of men opening doors for women, throwing their jackets over puddles, and paying for dinners. All admittedly nice things, save the jacket throwing—that just seems nuts, given the price of outerwear these days. But this is how they get you. Doing things like opening doors for people is *polite*. I would hope one would do as much for anyone if they got to the door first. Chivalry is something completely different. Chivalry is the idea that men should be doing something for women for one of two reasons: They think women aren't capable of doing things for themselves; they think that doing things like opening doors should get them laid. Again, I think doing nice things for people, whether you're dating them or not, is fantastic. I love it when my significant other does shit for me (now, whether this is because I'm slightly lazy, I don't know). But we should draw a distinction.

One of my favorite examples of chivalry gone wild is from a column in a college paper that my friend and fellow feminist blogger Jill Filipovic wrote about. Basically, this male student

complaining that chivalry is dead because women had the audacity to do things for themselves: “And so emerged a group of warrior princesses affectionately referred to as Feminazis; lean, mean, emasculating machines in power suits who proved to the world that women are intelligent, strong, capable, and incredibly frightening.” You have to love a guy who thinks capable women are “frightening.” Jill’s response to this is spot on:

There’s a difference between being chivalrous and being nice or polite. Opening a door for someone because you got to the door first is both nice and polite; making a huge production of opening a door for a woman in the hopes that she’ll see what a chivalrous dude you are and fuck you (and then getting all pissy when she doesn’t respond how you want her to) is not polite or nice. And that’s the thing with chivalry: It always demands something in return. If you’re being nice to me because you like me and you’re the kind of person who is nice to people you like, then that’s great. If you’re being nice to me because you’re hoping to get something out of it, or if you think you’re entitled to sex or a relationship with me because you were nice and “chivalrous,” you can go fuck yourself. See how that works?

Love it. And frankly, when you take a look at the people who are pushing old-school notions of chivalry and romance, you may think twice before letting a dude pick up the check. Most often, it’s conservatives you’ll hear arguing that chivalry is dead. (And that feminists killed it, of course.) They are folks who have a specific agenda in mind—mostly one that involves getting women back in the kitchen. For real.

Conservative women’s group the Independent Women’s Forum, for example, has a campaign called “Take Back the Date,” where they try to counter what they call “hookup culture” by promoting old-school dating practices—like bringing flowers, boys asking girls out and never vice versa, and so on. Doesn’t really sound terrible, right? Well, the *other* part of “Taking Back the Date” is protesting feminists on campus and any college performances of *The Vagina Monologues*. (Because talking about vaginas is counter to romance, apparently.) They see promoting chivalry as an easy way to promote other traditional gender roles.

Chivalry is also used as an excuse to glorify the “good old days” when men were men and women were doormats. In fact, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks once wrote that the reason rape still exists is that chivalry is no longer around. (As if women didn’t get raped in the good old days. Uh-huh.) So seriously, let’s not romanticize something that’s not necessarily all that great.

So... what to do?

I’m not going to lie: I’m not going to stop letting guys open doors for me, and I’ll probably still like it when someone offers to help me put my jacket on. But I’m not going to *expect* anything from men. Similarly, I would hope that men—upon doing random nice things—wouldn’t expect anything in return. And when it comes to the dangers of being on a pedestal, just don’t go there.



HE'S METROSEXUAL, SHE'S ANOREXIC

UNREALISTIC BEAUTY STANDARDS are one of those feminist topics that you have to love because no one in their right mind can argue that they don't exist. We see images of unattainable beauty norms everywhere—in magazines, television, advertisements, movies, you name it. All touting the same image of what's supposed to be an attractive woman: white, thin, blond (usually), big boobs, the whole package. And sure, men have beauty standards to live up to as well. But not nearly on the same level as women. Attractiveness standards for men tell them to be big, strong, to take up space. Our beauty standards tell us to shrink, be weak, take up as little space as possible.

Then, of course, men's beauty standards tend to end *above* the waist. For women, it's no longer good enough to be emaciated, tanned, siliconed, shaved, and just generally trussed up. Now we have to make sure that every inch of us—even the naughty bits—is equally “beautiful.”

Seriously, where are men's penis-beauty standards? Yes, men get circumcised, but the new labiaplasty trend—where women have their vaginas tightened and lips shortened in order to have prettier pussies (whatever that means)—goes above and beyond.

Labiaplasty—or “vaginal rejuvenation surgery”—is one of the fastest-growing plastic surgeries out there, despite being dangerous, painful, and potentially damaging to your ability to have pleasurable sex. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists released a public warning against the surgery, noting that potential risks include “infection, scarring, nerve damage, and loss of sensation.” Good times.

So why would women line up to get the surgery? Because these charming docs, along with the pop culture industry and lad-mad culture, are telling women that their normal vaginas are ugly and vile the way they are. And isn't that more important than your future relationship with orgasms?

Now, the same folks who brought you your newfound vaginal in-securities are pushing surgery packages with empowering-sounding names like “Wonder Woman Makeover,” which include “several vaginal procedures, breast implants and a breast lift, abdominal liposuction, and a ‘Brazilian butt augmentation.’” Where are the Superman Makeovers, you ask? Sorry, no such thing.

There are also no “Daddy Makeovers” to compare to the new trend of “Mommy Makeovers,” either.

~~—this is when moms who have just had kids get surgery to “fix” their postpartum bodies. (I can see the male version now. Dads, get rid of that beer gut! Your wife will love your new toned physique!)~~

And it’s not just the usual suspects of body parts when it comes to beauty standards. Another new and improved way to maim—I mean ‘improve’—yourself: Now you can fit into those designer shoes by cutting off your toes. Or shortening them. For real—people are actually doing this. Dr Ali Sadrieh, a podiatrist from California, says, “Toes are the new nose.” Now, I like heels as much as the next gal, but generally I look for shoes to fit my feet—not feet to fit my shoes. Just saying.

The old standard of weight is still around as well, naturally. But now instead of just being thin, you have to be dying. Literally. The covers of celebrity weeklies are covered with anorexic starlets, their ribs bones jutting out from sagging skin and oversize sunglasses. Of course, the headlines feign concern (“Brad to Angelina: You have to eat!”; “Nicole’s struggle with weight”), but they’re glamorizing the disease simply by having these women on the cover. Being a sickly-thin celeb is a surefire way to rev up your career (second to having a baby, of course).

The common theme here? Beauty standards for women are more extreme than ever. (There’s even the reality show *Extreme Makeover* to prove it!) Pop culture has everything revved up—we can’t have normal sex, it has to be porn sex. We can’t have normal vaginas, they have to be teeny, tiny, hairless vaginas. We can’t be skinny, we have to be anorexic. It’s just all too much to live up to.

So... what to do?

Don’t believe the hype. (Yes, I am a Public Enemy fan.) And for the love of all things natural, don’t get surgery—it’s just bad news. And when it comes to the images that are shoved in our faces day after day, be a critical thinker. (Easier said than done, sometimes.) To steal some advice from my girl Courtney Martin, author of *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, who wrote a great piece on loving your body for Feministing:

“Never diet. Never ever. It is a \$31 billion industry that fails 95 percent of the time. That’s just stupid. Don’t spend money on products made by companies that make you feel inadequate. Duh. Redefine your notion of success to include your own wellness—including joy, fulfillment, resilience, and self-love.”

Yeah, she’s a little hippie-ish, but she’s a smart lady. Listen to her. Plus, I love hippies.



HE'S "LUCKY," SHE'S LOLITA

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN YEARS OLD I met the hottest guy ever. He was six-three, muscular, and had a (swoon) tattoo on his arm. He was also twenty. Not the ideal age, I admit, but Jason and I had great time together. Looking back, though, I can say with certainty that I was much more mature than he was at the time. (I was taking Organic Chemistry; he was applying to be on *The Real World*. Just saying.) We had a decent yearlong relationship that ended when his modeling/acting career didn't take off (don't laugh) and he moved back home to upstate New York. A fairly normal romance? Actually no. Under New York state law, Jason could have been arrested for statutory rape, even though our relationship was consensual.

Fucked up for him? Absolutely. Men are prosecuted every year for statutory rape despite being in consensual relationships. (That isn't to say I think there shouldn't be consent laws *at all*, but clearly something needs to change when innocent men are going to jail and young women are being told they don't have the right to have sex.)

While—like a lot of sexism—this affects both men and women, the double standards in consent laws are mired in misogyny. Teenage girls who have sex can be either victims or whores. That's it. We're either poor little virginal things who were taken advantage of or hot-to-trot vixens who seduce our way through high school. (Sounds like a Lifetime movie already!) Men, on the other hand, are able to have sex whenever they want. You know, because unlike women, they *like* sex. (Sigh.) No one asks questions if they were taken advantage of. I mean, even in recent cases in the media where older female teachers had sex with young male students, there were comments about how "lucky" the boys were.

This teen-sex double standard is based on the antiquated—and false—notion that women don't like sex. Or at least we shouldn't.

The problem for women with consent laws, and really anything to do with ideas surrounding teen sex, is that women are assumed to be victims simply because of our age. The logic is that we don't have the wherewithal to make up our own minds about sex. Now, do all girls have the emotional maturity to have a sexual relationship? Of course not. But plenty of teenagers do—unfortunately, a lot of folks can't handle that. To be clear, I'm not talking about a fifteen-year-old dating some creep

thirty-year-old. There's no doubt that with certain age differences (whether it's men or women who are older) there's a power dynamic that makes real informed consent almost impossible.

But are we so invested in the idea of teen girls as little virginal angels that we can't be honest about their sexual desires? Young women can choose to have sex. They can choose not to. For too many people, that's just too much freedom for young women to have.

And when we have laws that are based on the idea that young women couldn't possibly want to have sex, we have an issue. Because under this framework, when it's clear that young women *are* choosing to have sex, it means there's something wrong with them—they must be whores.

Of course, there is a way out of the virgin/whore trap—marriage. The virgin/whore complex is hard at work on this one! If you're married, you can have any kind of sex you want! Shit, if you're thirteen years old and married in Kansas, your sex is legal. If you're sixteen years old but unmarried, not so much. Which, of course, is the real point of all this nonsense: keeping young women pure (whatever that means). If we're married, no matter what our age or maturity level, somehow our sex is sanctioned. So, at the end of the day, these laws and ideas about teen girls and sex aren't about keeping us safe. They aren't about protecting young women or caring about their well-being. They're about making sure girls remain chaste.

So... what to do?

Let's start by not judging young women on what their sexual lives are like. Let's not assume young women shouldn't want to have sex, and that young men should. And instead of assuming that a young woman who is sexually active is somehow a victim or a slut, let's make no assumptions. At all. And let's start talking about how to really talk to young women about sex. We're so caught up in the idea that teen girls are victims or vixens that we don't prepare them to be something in between—informed, mature, aware young women. It's time to start doing just that.



HE'S A BACHELOR, SHE'S A SPINSTER

THERE'S SOMETHING HOT ABOUT SINGLE MEN. They're bachelors, with cool apartments and the freedom to do whatever they want without judgment. Sure, they may catch occasional shrapnel from their mother about "finding the right girl," but for the most part they're respected. Single women, on the other hand—especially single women who have the gall to be over thirty—we're old maids. Spinsters. Desperate to be Bridezillas and moms. There's no such thing as a happy single woman. We're all just wives-in-training or crazy cat ladies.

There's something about unmarried women that society just doesn't like. That's why the media is constantly telling us how miserable single women are. For example, *The Today Show* ran a segment about single working women where an editor for *Marie Claire* called women who don't get married and have kids "fembots." You know, 'cause we must be robotic and frigid if we want careers before we have a family. The editor actually went so far as to call women who care a lot about their careers "emotionally unavailable." But painting women who don't get married as vicious career women or sad old spinsters is nothing new.

As I wrote in an essay for *Single State of the Union*,¹ the media likes to portray single women as caricatures. If we're young and "sexy," we're "office piranhas" trying to steal married men. If we're older, either we're desperate or we're "cougars." And the bad science studies come out in force when it comes to single gals: The new trend is reporting that women won't get married if they're too successful, too educated, or too old—as in over twenty-five.

The most annoying thing about these stereotypes and "studies" is that they assume that all women want to get married and that all women are straight! (Lesbian women just don't exist when it comes to the media these days.)

The scary truth (at least, what society sees as scary) is that women may be better off *not* getting married. One of my favorite writers, Natalie Angier, wrote a piece for *The New York Times* a while back about how marriage really benefits men more than it does women (despite the media-created frenzy about women just dying to get married and men wanting to put it off):

In 1972 . . . Jesse Bernard wrote a highly influential book called *The Future of Marriage*

which she argued that wedding bells sounded the death knell to a woman's well-being. M
Bernard presented data indicating that while married men scored higher than single men o
measures of mental health like depression, severe neurotic symptoms, and phobic tendencies
the opposite applied for women.²

Angier points out that this isn't the case for all women, obviously, and that, depending on the kind
of partner someone has, everyone's situation is different. But it does give me pause. As does the study
that showed that married women do a ton more housework than men—there's even a marked
difference when you live with a man as opposed to being married. (Living together there's less
housework; married you do more—whatever.)

Now, this certainly isn't a diatribe against marriage—I'd like to get married one day. But making
marriage seem like the end goal for all women and the Best Thing Ever just isn't honest.

And if marriage is so amazing and great, why would conservatives need all of these initiative
organizations, and legislation to push women to get hitched? Wouldn't the joy of being a wife be
enough? Apparently not.

Conservatives are recognizing that more and more women aren't rushing to the altar—plenty
couples are cohabiting, and people are waiting until they're a bit older to get hitched. Then, of course
there's the divorce rate. So, because they're so tied to the idea of marriage holding together traditional
gender roles, they're taking action. There's even a lawmaker in Idaho who is doing his best to try
create legislation that would essentially trap women in marriage and push them to stay at home
instead of working in the public sphere: Chairman of the Idaho House of Representatives' Family
Task Force, Rep. Steven Thayne, is trying to repeal no-fault divorce laws and convening task forces to
figure out ways to encourage mothers to stay home with their children. Funny that initiatives like
these never target men. And notice that these groups, who seem to just love marriage, aren't so
concerned with making same-sex marriage legal. Imagine that.

It's all about getting single women married, because there's a belief that married women will mean
traditional women. And that's scary.

So... what to do?

Get married, by all means. But don't do it because you think you need to in order to be a full
person, or because the media is breathing down your neck with bullshit statistics about
successful, smart women missing out on the hubby train because they had the nerve to care
about their own single lives. Start referring to yourself as a bachelorette and enjoy your single
life! (And while you're at it, make sure you're fighting for same-sex marriage, because what
good is doing something that's being used to discriminate against so many people?)

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