

introduction

THERE IS A MORAL PANIC IN AMERICA over young women's sexuality—and it's entirely misplaced. Girls “going wild” aren't damaging a generation of women, the myth of sexual purity is. The lie of virginity—the idea that such a thing even exists—is ensuring that young women's perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent on their sexuality. It's time to teach our daughters that their ability to be good people depends on their *being good people*, not on whether or not they're sexually active.

A combination of forces—our media- and society-driven virginity fetish, an increase in abstinence-only education, and the strategic political rollback of women's rights among the primary culprits—has created a juggernaut of

unrealistic sexual expectations for young women. Unable to live up to the ideal of purity that's forced upon them in one aspect of their lives, many young women are choosing the hypersexualized alternative that's offered to them everywhere else as the easier—and more attractive—option.

More than 1,400 purity balls, where young girls pledge their virginity to their fathers at a promlike event, were held in 2006 (the balls are federally funded).¹ Facebook is peppered with purity groups that exist to support girls trying to “save it.” Schools hold abstinence rallies and assemblies featuring hip-hop dancers and comedians alongside religious leaders. Virginity and chastity are reemerging as a trend in pop culture, in our schools, in the media, and even in legislation. So while young women are subject to overt sexual messages every day, they're simultaneously being taught—by the people who are supposed to care for their personal and moral development, no less—that their only real worth is their virginity and ability to remain “pure.”

So what are young women left with? Abstinence-only education during the day and Girls Gone Wild commercials at night! Whether it's delivered through a virginity pledge or by a barely dressed tween pop singer writhing across the television screen, the message is the same: A woman's worth lies in her ability—or her refusal—to be sexual. And we're teaching American girls that, one way or another, their bodies and their sexuality are what make them valuable. The sexual double standard is alive and well, and it's irrevocably damaging young women.

The Purity Myth is something I've been thinking about for a long time. When I lost my virginity as a high school freshman, I didn't understand why I didn't feel changed somehow. Wasn't this supposed to be, like, a big deal? Later, in college, as I'd listen to male friends deride their sexual partners as sluts and whores, I struggled to comprehend how intercourse could mean one

thing for men and quite another for women. I knew that *logically*, nothing about sex could make a girl “dirty,” but I found it incredibly frustrating that my certainty about this seemed to be lost on my male peers. And as I talked to my queer friends, whose sexual experiences were often dismissed because they didn’t fit into the heterosexual model, I started to realize how useless “virginity” really was.

I started to see the myth of sexual purity everywhere—though in the work I do as a feminist blogger and writer, it wasn’t exactly hard to find. Whether it appears in a story about a man killing his girlfriend while calling her a whore or in trying to battle conservative claims that emergency contraception or the HPV vaccine will make girls promiscuous, the purity myth in America underlies more misogyny than most people would like to admit.

And while the definition of “virginity” is fairly abstract (as you’ll see in Chapter 1), its consequences for young women are not. And that’s why I wanted, and needed, to write this book. *The Purity Myth* is for women who are suffering every day because of the lie that virginity exists, and that it has some bearing on who we are and how good we are. Consider the implications virginity has on the high school girl who is cruelly labeled a slut after an innocuous makeout session; the woman from a background so religiously conservative that she opts to have her hymen surgically reattached rather than suffer the consequences of a nonbloody bedsheet on her wedding night; or the rape survivor who’s dismissed or even faulted because she dared to have past consensual sexual encounters.

My reasons for wanting to write this book aren’t entirely altruistic, however. I was once that teenage girl struggling with the meaning behind my sexuality, and how my own virginity, or lack thereof, reflected whether or not I was a good person. I was the cruelly labeled slut, the burgeoning

feminist who knew that something was wrong with a world that could peg me as a bad person for sleeping with a high school boyfriend while ignoring my good heart, sense of humor, and intelligence. Didn't the intricacies of my character count for anything? The answer, unfortunately, was no, they didn't. It was a hard lesson to learn, and one that too many young women are dealing with nationwide.

U N D E R S T A N D I N G T H E M Y T H

On Love Matters, a pro-life, pro-abstinence website, pictures of smiling young women who are “saving themselves” are featured next to quotes about virginity and marriage. Kimberly Gloudemans, Miss California Teen USA 1997, beams under her brunette coiffed hair and a rhinestone tiara. Next to her picture, the caption reads, “It’s been echoed to teens over and over again . . . we have no morals, no dreams, and no future. But I know I am not a part of that same generation. In fact, millions of teenagers are finding out the same thing about themselves. . . . We have morals and are standing up for what we believe in. . . . Because of that I am saving sex for marriage.”

I’ve always found the idea of “saving” your virginity intriguing: It’s not as if we’re packing our Saran-wrapped hymens away in the freezer, after all, or pasting them in scrapbooks (admittedly, not the best visual—my apologies). But packed-away virginites aside, the interesting—and dangerous—idea at play here is that of “morality.” When young women are taught about morality, there’s not often talk of compassion, kindness, courage, or integrity. There is, however, a lot of talk about hymens (though the preferred words are undoubtedly more refined—think “virginity” and “chastity”): if we have them, when we’ll lose them, and under what circumstances we’ll be rid of them.

While boys are taught that the things that make them men—good men—are universally accepted ethical ideals, women are led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs. Literally. Whether it's the determining factor in our "cleanliness" and "purity" or the marker of our character, virginity has an increasingly dangerous hold over young women. It affects not only our ability to see ourselves as ethical actors outside of our own bodies, but also how the world interacts with us through social mores, laws, and even violence.

PURE CONSEQUENCES

Women are pushing themselves and punishing themselves every day in order to fit into the narrow model of morality that virginity has afforded them. Some of us get unnecessary plastic surgery—down to our vaginas, which can be tightened, clipped, and "revirginized"—in order to seem younger. Others simply buy into old-school gender norms of ownership, dependence, and perpetual girlhood.

And don't be mistaken about the underlying motivations of our moral panic around the hypersexualization of young women. It's more about chastity than about promiscuity. T-shirts sold in teen catalogs with I'M TIGHT LIKE SPANDEX emblazoned across the front aren't announcing sexiness; they're announcing virginity. The same is true for "sexy schoolgirl" costumes or provocative pictures of Disney teen pop singers. By fetishizing youth and virginity, we're supporting a disturbing message: that really sexy women aren't women at all—they're girls.

If we're to truly understand the purity myth, we have to recognize that this modernized virgin/whore dichotomy is not only leading young women to damage themselves by internalizing the double standard, but also

contributing to a social and political climate that is increasingly antagonistic to women and our rights.

Virginity fetishism has even made its way into politics and legislation. In 2007, Republican South Dakota representative Bill Napoli described his support for a ban on abortion that allowed no exceptions for rape or incest by relaying a (quite vivid) scenario to a reporter. He explained under what circumstances the procedure *might* be warranted: “A real-life description to me would be a rape victim, brutally raped, savaged. The girl was a virgin. She was religious. She planned on saving her virginity until she was married. She was brutalized and raped, sodomized as bad as you can possibly make it, and is impregnated.”²

I found this moment so telling: Napoli couldn’t help but let his misogyny and paternalism seep into his abortion sound bite, because, to him and to so many other men (and other legislators, for that matter), there’s no separating virginity, violence, and control over women’s bodies. When it comes to women who are perceived as “impure,” there’s a narrative of punishment that underscores U.S. policy and public discourse—be it legislation that limits reproductive rights through the assumption that women should be chaste before marriage, or a media that demonizes victims of sexual violence. And, sadly, if you look at everything from our laws to our newspapers, Napoli isn’t as far out of the mainstream as we’d like to think.

T O W A R D A N E W M O R A L I T Y

Women—especially young women, who are the most targeted in this virgin/whore straitjacket—are surviving the purity myth every day. And it has to stop. Our daughters deserve a model of morality that’s based on ethics, not on their bodies.

It's high time to do away with outdated—and dangerous—notions of virginity. If young women's only ethical gauge is based on whether they're chaste, we're ensuring that they will continue to define themselves by their sexuality.

In *The Purity Myth*, I not only discuss what the purity myth is and reveal its consequences for women, but also outline a new way for us to think about young women as moral actors, one that doesn't include their bodies. Not just because we deserve as much, but also because our health, our emotional well-being, and even our lives depend on it.