

THE PURITY MYTH

Featuring Jessica Valenti

[Transcript]

Jessica Valenti: There is a moral panic in America over young women's sexuality. And it's been breathing new life into a very old idea.

[Television clip: "Extra"]

Miley Cyrus: "I am living my life the way that I think should be lived, and that's staying pure."

Interviewer: "So you really believe in no sex before marriage?"

Cyrus: "No, I don't at all."

Valenti: In what claims to be an antidote against the hypersexualization of American culture – things like sexting, "Girls Gone Wild," spring break, hookup culture, and other signs that young American women are spiraling out of control in a haze of promiscuity and moral decay – traditional ideas about purity are suddenly everywhere.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Sean Hannity: "We've so over-sexualized our society. We're robbing these kids of their innocence."

[Internet video: LifeChurch.tv]

Preacher: "And so I want to talk to you today about pursuing the mission of purity."

Valenti: Each year, thousands of purity balls – prom-like galas where young girls pledge their virginity to their fathers – are held across almost every state in the country. Politicians increasingly extol the virtues of abstinence and virginity.

[Television clip: 2004 State of the Union]

Fmr. President George W. Bush: "Abstinence for young people is the only certain way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases."

[Television clip: Fox News]

Mitt Romney: "We want to see kids wait before they start having babies and sex."

Valenti: And all told, American taxpayers shell out about \$50 million a year on abstinence-only education in our schools – almost half a billion dollars since 1996.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Ellen Marie: “If you put yourself in a tempting situation, it’s going to be tempting, and it’s going to be tough. And it’s better to draw the line way back – draw the line way back so you’re not in a tempting situation.”

Valenti: The leaders who are really pushing this return to purity believe that sex is the greatest source of danger to young women.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Lakita Garth: “There is no such thing as safe sex.”

Valenti: And they’ve been prescribing a return to traditional gender roles as the cure.

[Television clip: C-Span 2]

Miriam Grossman: “Maybe Mom was right all these years – that a woman’s deepest fulfillment is in motherhood.”

Valenti: And in the process, they’ve been resurrecting a very antiquated notion about women’s sexuality.

[Television clip: Wisconsin Public Access]

Matt Trehella: “Here’s what the Word of God says regarding women: It says ‘to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the Word of God may not be blasphemed.’”

Valenti: And what makes this current crop of purity pushers so dangerous is how they’re actively working to roll back women’s rights – using the purity myth to do it.

[Television clip: “The Today Show”]

Interviewer: “Jessica, you call it a myth – ‘the purity myth.’ What do you mean?”

Jessica Valenti: “The purity myth is the lie that women’s sexuality has some bearing on who we are and how good we are. Because really I think that we all know that young women are so much more than whether or not they have sex. We really should be teaching our daughters that their ability to be good people is based on their intelligence, their compassion, their kindness – not what they do with their bodies.”

[Title Screen]

[Film clip: *Are You Popular?*]

Narrator: “Popularity. What is it made of? How does a person get to be popular with lots of people and have a few close friends too?”

Jenny: “Yoo-hoo!”

Narrator: “Jenny thinks that she has the key to popularity: parking in cars with the boys at night. When Jerry brags about taking Jenny out, he learns that she dates all the boys. What about Jenny? Does that make her really popular?”

Jessica Valenti: The traditional belief is that American women should be held to a different set of moral standards than men.

[Film clip: *Are You Popular?*]

Narrator: “No. Girls who park in cars are not really popular – not even with the boys they park with.”

Valenti: And despite decades of struggle by feminists, this double standard has refused to die.

[Film clip: *No Strings Attached*]

Guy #1: “Did you have sex with Emma?”

Guy #2: “No.”

Guy #1: “Did you have sex with Emma?”

Guy #2: “Yes. I’m not supposed to tell anyone.”

Guy #1: “Yes! Wow!”

[Film clip: *Easy A*]

Girl #1: “Wait a minute!”

Girl #2: “What?”

Girl #1: You didn’t have...?

Girl #2: “No! No, of course not.”

Girl #1: “You liar! You totally lost your V-card to him.”

Girl #2: “No, I didn’t!”

Girl #1: “Yes, you did! Tell me everything.”

Girl #2: “Ri, I’m not that kind of girl.”

[Advertisement: Boy Scouts of America]

Scout: “On my honor, I will do my best...”

Valenti: When it comes to measuring the character of young men, sex is really beside the point.

[Advertisement: Boy Scouts of America]

Scout: “To help other people at all times...”

Valenti: Boys are routinely taught the things that make them men are universally accepted ethical ideals like courage, honesty, and integrity. While women, however, are still led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs, literally.

[Film clip: *The Rules of Attraction*]

College Guy #1: “I met a girl.”

College Guy #2: “Yeah?”

College Guy #1: “She’s sweet. She’s pure. She’s innocent. She’s a virgin.”

Valenti: The virgin ideal is nothing new. And from the Virgin Mary to Taylor Swift, this ideal has almost always been synonymous with women.

[Music Video: “Fifteen”]

Taylor Swift (*singing*): “When you’re fifteen, and somebody tells you they love you...”

Valenti: The very word virginity conjures images of white dresses and unspoiled femininity. But the perfect virgin is not just any woman. She epitomizes the feminine ideal. She’s sexy, but not sexual. She’s always young, white, and skinny.

[Music Video: “You Belong With Me”]

Taylor Swift (*singing*): “Can’t you see you belong with me?”

Valenti: She’s shown as a cheerleader, a babysitter, a schoolgirl – always accessible and eager to please. She’s never a woman of color – who are too hypersexualized in our culture to ever be considered virginal. She’s never a low-income girl. She’s never fat or transgender. She’s never disabled.

[Music Video: “Like a Virgin”]

Madonna (*singing*): “Like a virgin touched for the very first time.”

Valenti: “Virgin” has really become a designation for a particular model of femininity and womanhood that marginalizes anyone who doesn’t meet those very narrow standards.

It's true you'll see the occasional pop culture reference to the male virgin. But the reason this is usually played for laughs is precisely because it's so strange.

[Film clip: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*]

Guy #1: "You know, when you grab a woman's breast, and you feel it, and it feels like a bag of sand when you're touching it."

Guy #2: "What are you talking about?"

Guy #3: "Have you ever felt a breast before, man?"

Valenti: Boys and men aren't considered less whole when they lose their virginity. They're not considered damaged goods. And they're certainly not considered marked for life by this one single act in the way that women are.

[Film clip: *Human Reproduction*]

Narrator: "A membrane partly covers the entrance to the vagina. This is the hymen or maidenhead."

Valenti: For centuries, the hymen has been considered the physical marker of virginity. But this is a total farce. Some women don't even have hymens. And they break for tons of reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with sex.

[Internet video: Sermon]

Pastor John Hagee: "The blood covenant is the most powerful of covenants. It cannot be broken."

Valenti: But to a lot of people, this invented physical distinction remains the ultimate marker of whether or not a woman has had sex.

[Internet video: Sermon]

Hagee: "It is pressed that a man marry a virgin. Because when a man marries a virgin, on the night of their wedding, when the hymen is broken, blood is shed. And that is a covenant relationship. It is a blood covenant. It is an unbreakable covenant."

Valenti: The fact is that people have been talking about virginity for thousands of years like they know what they're talking about, even though – as historian Hanne Blank has pointed out – we still don't even have a working medical definition for it.

If virginity is simply the first time someone has sex, then what is sex? And if sex is just heterosexual intercourse, does that mean that all lesbians and gay men are virgins? And what constitutes heterosexual penetration anyway?

[Film clip: *American Pie*]

Jim's Dad: "Jim?" (*After walking in on Jim having sex with a pie*)

Jim: "It's not what it looks like."

Valenti: Any way you cut it, sexuality is too subjective and riddled with ambiguity to pretend that we can define virginity. But this hasn't stopped the major players in the virginity movement from offering up virginity as the ultimate measure of a woman's character.

CLASSROOM CHASTITY

[DVD clip: *Abstinence Educator*]

Keith Deltano: "Go home and try it. Clear your kitchen table and go, 'peanut butter sandwich.' This now now 'bout a story named Jed. Crack! Woo! (*He continues making strange sounds*)"

Jessica Valenti: Despite appearances to the contrary, Keith Deltano is not a school bully or an escaped lunatic. He's an abstinence-only educator who uses this brick trick to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of condoms.

[DVD clip: *Abstinence Educator*]

Deltano: "Rob, there's a 90% chance that I'm not gonna drop this block on your family's future."

Valenti: Deltano is just one of hundreds of abstinence educators who speak in schools, churches, community groups – even government agencies – nationwide.

[DVD clip: *Abstinence Educator*]

Jason Evert: "Now masturbation, when it comes down to it – you know, being frank – it's basically the same thing as selfishness."

Valenti: They work on the front lines of the new virginity movement, and they have made it their mission to teach young people about the dangers of sex...

[DVD clip: *Abstinence Educator*]

Lakita Garth: "Every year, we see there are young people who are dying everyday because they did have sex."

Valenti: To warn them about the ineffectiveness of birth control...

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Mary Beth Bonacci: “All birth control has what’s known as a failure rate, which means it’s guaranteed to fail a certain percentage of the time. That’s what failure rate means. That’s not safe.”

Valenti: And to teach them the supposed value of virginity until marriage.

Abstinence-only educators like Pam Stenzel use quips to win students over with humor.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Pam Stenzel: “If you are not married, don’t do it. If you are married, go for it – with the person you’re married to. I have to put that in there. Some of you get a little confused.”

Valenti: And they slide easily into darker themes, like how birth control and abortion can kill them.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Stenzel: “I will have a girl write me, email me, or come right up to me and say this: ‘Well, my mom found out I was having sex, and so she put me on the pill.’ What’s that protecting that girl from? What’s birth control protect you from? Pregnancy. That drug – that hormone that this girl is taking – has just made her ten times more likely to contract a disease than if she were not taking that drug. This girl’s gonna end up sterile or dead. Thanks, Mom. Glad you cared.”

Valenti: But they’re also very careful not to make it all gloom and doom.

[Advertisement: Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference]

Woman: “Could you move over just a bit? You’re blocking my sun.”

Man: “Excuse me.”

Woman: “I’m working on my tan for the Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference in Puerto Rico.”

Valenti: The virginity movement is smart, and it’s catching on that threats of cinder blocks to the crotch and death by birth control don’t quite win students hearts and minds.

[Advertisement: Abstinence Clearinghouse Conference]

Woman: “Three full days of high-energy speakers, in both English and Espanol, plus two conference tracks just for the youth.”

Valenti: So now, abstinence educators are pumping up the “youth” factor in their presentations.

Students can buy shirts proclaiming their virginal status with messages like “ChasteGirl,” “Chaste Couture,” and, my personal favorite, “No Trespassing on This Property, My Father is Watching.” There is even abstinence underwear. Websites sell promise rings, posters – anything you can think to slap a purity message on is there for the buying.

But spin as they might, there’s no getting around the essential message.

[Television clip: “Strangers With Candy”]

Coach (*holding a cherry*): “Virginity. Remember: a virgin body has the morning sheen of an unopened flower.”

Valenti: Without their virginity, girls are just used up and dirty.

[Television clip: “Strangers With Candy”]

Coach: “It’s your choice, ladies. Hold onto your glorious ripe fruit or…” (*Smashes cherry with hammer*) “Comprende?”

Valenti: This isn’t the kind of thing you expect or want to hear in our classrooms. But it is.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Pam Stenzel: “When I didn’t used to speak so much, I used to use duct tape. I’d take duct tape with me, and I’d say, ‘Sex is the ability to bond two people together just like this tape.’ I’d take a big piece of that tape, rip it off, get my sleeve all rolled up, wrap that tape around my arm, and it would stick pretty good the first time I did that. ‘I don’t want the tape here anymore.’ And I’d rip it off, and pieces of my arm would come with the back of the tape. Move it on down to the next person. Stick it to their arm. It’ll stick a little. Not as good as it did the first time. Maybe a little. Rip it off their arm. Now we got junk from their arm and my arm on the back of this tape. Move down to the next person. Stick it there. Rip it off their arm. Now we got junk from their arm and their arm. Pretty soon the tape’s not going to stick to anything at all. It’s got so much junk from everywhere it’s been.”

Valenti: But this moves beyond teachers intimidating students. It’s also about spreading straight-up lies.

A 2004 report from Congressman Henry Waxman showed that over 80% of federally funded abstinence programs contain false information about sex and reproductive health.

[Television clip: CNN]

Reporter: “Among the alleged errors cited: repeated use of a disputed study showing condoms fail to prevent HIV 31% of the time in heterosexual sex, which government researchers have shot down; a claim that mutual masturbation can lead to pregnancy, a theoretical possibility at best; and a claim that up to 10% of women who have abortions will be sterile. There’s no evidence for that.”

Valenti: And in addition to all of the inaccuracies, there's a mountain of evidence that shows these programs just flat-out don't work.

[Television clip: ABC News]

Charles Gibson: "A new study mandated by Congress is raising doubts about the effectiveness of government-funded programs promoting abstinence until marriage."

[Television clip: CNN]

Anderson Cooper: "Nine out of ten Americans, both men and women, have had premarital sex, and it's been that way since the 1950s."

[Congressional Hearing]

Congressman Henry Waxman: "The abstinence-only programs had no impact on whether or not participants abstained from sex. They had no impact on the age when teens started having sex. They had no impact on the number of partners. And they had no impact on rates of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases."

Valenti: In fact, there's now a virtual consensus among the most reputable, non-partisan health organizations that abstinence-only education does exactly the opposite of what it intends to do.

[Television clip: "The Today Show"]

Matt Lauer: "A major new study reports teens who pledge to remain virgins until marriage are more likely to engage in other kinds of potentially risky sexual behavior."

Valenti: A 2005 study commissioned by Congress, and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, found that teenagers who took abstinence-only classes and pledged their virginity were actually more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behavior across the board.

[Television clip: "The Today Show"]

Dr. Mark Schuster: "What they think is going on is that these kids are trying to stay true to the pledge, but they also want to engage in sexual activity, so they feel they're remaining abstinent not having vaginal intercourse, and they're seeking other ways of having sex, and they may not recognize that they can still get sexually transmitted diseases from these other sexual activity."

Valenti: But despite all of the evidence that abstinence-only education is a complete public health failure, it somehow continues to be funded by American taxpayers. How do we explain this? Well, according to George W. Bush's own Surgeon General, the answer turns out to be pretty simple.

[Television clip: CNN]

Dr. Richard Carmona: “We knew scientifically that abstinence-only was not a scientifically based policy. It was one that was based more on ideology.”

Valenti: What the abstinence-only movement has been selling has never been about science, public health or concern for young people. So here’s the biggest question of all: What is it about virginity that’s so politically useful to the conservative movement?

THE ETHICS OF PASSIVITY

[Internet video: Abstinence Clearinghouse]

Secretary: “It’s a great day at the Abstinence Clearinghouse. How can I help you?”

Jessica Valenti: The Abstinence Clearinghouse is one of the most influential pro-purity organizations in the country.

[Internet video: Abstinence Clearinghouse]

Man from Chamber of Commerce: “For the ribbon-cutting ceremony today, we welcome the National Absence? Abstinence? Absense? Abstinence Clearinghouse.”

Valenti: The Sioux Falls-based nonprofit, which has something like 4,000 affiliates in 50 states and 105 countries, serves as kind of a one-stop shop for educators, activists, and religious leaders in search of materials to promote virginity until marriage.

Its website is a virtual cornucopia of virginity worship. From videos of guest speakers and classroom curricula packets to personal safety products like lipstick pepper spray and 100,000-volt stun guns, the Abstinence Clearinghouse has all of your purity needs covered.

But its anti-sex work goes beyond distributing weaponry and purity gear – and beyond just education.

[Internet video: Abstinence Clearinghouse]

Fmr. President George W. Bush: “Laura and I send greetings to everyone attending the Abstinence Clearinghouse 2004 Conference.”

Leslee Unruh: “We love the president.”

Valenti: It’s a political operation as well. And that’s due in no small part to the fact that Leslee Unruh heads it.

[Internet video: Abstinence Clearinghouse]

Unruh: “He said to me one time: ‘What part of this don’t they get? Abstinence works every single time.’”

Valenti: Unruh first gained national attention in 2006 when she campaigned in South Dakota for a total ban on abortions – even in cases of rape and incest.

[Television clip: ABC News]

Reporter: “Leslee Unruh is for the law and thinks that so-called incremental approach is immoral.”

Unruh: “Parental consent, informed consent, 24-hour waiting, everything. Tell us where it got us: more dead babies.”

Valenti: Her m.o. is calling women who get abortions – which are legal – murderers, while shrouding it in misleading and sometimes bizarre rhetoric about loving babies.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Unruh: “I want more babies! More babies! We love babies!”

Valenti: But beyond the gushing baby love, what matters most here is that groups like Unruh’s are part of a much larger network of religious and secular groups that have been pushing a socially conservative policy agenda for decades. And if you listen closely, a pretty clear theme emerges.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Marc Rudov: “As I said before, women are the biggest practitioners of sexism because women want to be placed on pedestals, women demand and get special rights – like the unconstitutional Violence Against Women Act, unconstitutional Roe v Wade. Everywhere they go, they’re getting special this, special that.”

Valenti: It’s really about reinforcing traditional gender roles and restoring the old gender order.

[Montage: Traditional gender roles]

James Dobson: “I mean, you can’t avoid it. Boys are boys and girls are girls.”

Wendy Wright: “There are unique differences between men and women and we shouldn’t deny those differences.”

Harvey Mansfield: “And I think, too, you underestimate the pride women take in domesticity, in keeping a clean house.”

Valenti: And this is where the purity myth links up with the larger backlash against feminism and women’s equality that’s been preoccupying conservatives and evangelicals for decades.

[Montage: Anti-feminism from conservative men]

Rush Limbaugh: “Feminism is what I oppose. Feminism has led women astray.”

Marc Rudov: “The fact of the matter is that feminism is sexism.”

Harvey Mansfield: “The number of unhappy marriages has been much increased by feminism.”

Pastor John Hagee: “Young man, if you’re dating a woman who boasts of being a feminist, who uses every four-letter word in the Marine Corps manual, who wants no children, who wants to drag you around like a dog on the end of a rope: Run!”

Valenti: But it’s not just a bunch of grumpy old white men trashing feminism.

[Montage: Anti-feminism from conservative women]

Suzanne Venker: “Feminism is not what people think it is. It has nothing to do with equality for women, and it has nothing to do with making women more independent.”

Phyllis Schlafly: “Really, feminism is the fraud of the century.”

Andrea Tantaros: “Because of this feminism era, we have a lot of choices. In fact, we have too many choices. We don’t know whether we want to have a baby; we could have a baby. We could get married; we don’t have to get married. We can go to a sperm donor; we don’t have to go to a sperm donor. We can marry our gay best friend; we don’t have to. We can get one egg; we can get two eggs; we can get a nanny; we can do whatever we want, and it’s stressing us out. I always say: if I saw Gloria Steinem, I don’t know if I’d hug her or punch her.”

Valenti: Anti-feminism is also coming from conservative women’s groups like Concerned Women for America, the Independent Women’s Forum, and the Claire Boothe Luce Policy Institute. These are organizations that have been fighting the good fight to do things like bring back the hope chest, overturn the Violence Against Women Act, and ban the Vagina Monologues.

[Film: *Summer Magic*]

Girl (singing): “You must walk feminine, talk feminine, smile, and beguile feminine.”

Valenti: Because what the virginity movement really wants from women is submissiveness.

[Film: *Summer Magic*]

Girl (singing): “That’s what every girl should know if she wants to catch a beau.”

Valenti: There’s a reason why their goal for women is only marriage and motherhood. The movement believes that that’s the only thing women are meant for.

[Film: *Summer Magic*]

Girl (*singing*): “Act shy and sigh feminine. Compliment his masculinity – that’s what every girl should know if she wants to catch a beau.”

Valenti: And while it’s not surprising to hear this kind of stuff in old movies, or even in the political arena, it is surprising to discover that it’s being taught – thanks to taxpayer money – in our public schools.

[Internet Video: Abstinence Educator]

Jason Evert: “And the man needs to pursue the woman. You know, some people think, ‘That’s just sexist’ – all these antiquated ideas and gender stereotyping. Personally, I love gender stereotyping. Men should be men, and women should be women. And I know men. A man wants to kill a dragon, and he wants to save a princess.”

Valenti: And they’re not just learning to be purity princesses in the classroom.

[Film clip: *Crossroads*]

Britney Spears (*singing*): “I’m not a girl...”

Valenti: Pop culture has also been putting virginity forward as some kind of ethical road map for women.

[Film clip: *Crossroads*]

Spears (*singing*): “Not yet a woman.”

[Television clip: VH1]

Spears: “Am I a virgin? I admit, yes, I am a virgin. I just want to wait for that special someone.”

[Television clip: “Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica”]

Priest: “Jessica can stand up here in this white wedding dress because, a long time ago, she committed her purity to God, and she stuck with that commitment.”

Valenti: So that with someone like Jessica Simpson, when her virginity was held up as some sort of achievement, women were supposed to want to be her – despite her public persona as an airhead.

[Television clip: “Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica”]

Nick Lachey: “Here she is right now.”

Jessica Simpson: “My ears are itching. Wait, is that right?” “Baby, do we have to be in the water all day?”

Valenti: She was positioned as a role model not just because she was beautiful by conventional standards or because of anything she'd actually done – but for something she didn't do: namely, have sex.

[DVD clip: Abstinence Educator]

Ellen Marie: “There’s an article that I found I really like, and it’s with Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey. And it came from a magazine article, and in the article he was asked – Nick was asked, ‘Have they made the decision together to be abstinent until marriage?’ And he’s asked in this interview, ‘Is Jessica’s decision to be abstinent from sex a hard thing to deal with?’ And he said, ‘It’s not the easiest thing in the world, but I respect her, and I think it’s very sexy.’”

Valenti: It’s enough that she’s pure, even if she is a bit of a dolt.

[Television clip: “Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica”]

Simpson: “Is this chicken that I have or is this fish? I know it’s tuna, but is this chicken? By the sea? Is that stupid?”

[Music Video: “These Boots Are Made For Walkin’”]

Simpson (*singing*): “Come on, boots.”

Valenti: If you’re a young woman being told to look up to someone like her, you’re apparently not supposed to notice that she might reveal few of her actual thoughts or actual moral, ethical or political beliefs.

And it turns out that sex is just fine, provided it meets with male approval – especially father’s.

[Television clip: “Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica”]

Joe Simpson: “Jessica has waited to sing about or have sex until she’s married, and now she’s married, and I think we’re celebrating the fact that she can do it till she’s blue in the face, and she can sing about it too.”

Valenti: What’s most important is that women adhere to the throwback social structures that tell us we exist purely for men. And when we don’t measure up to these regressive ideals, there’s hell to pay.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Shepard Smith: “Just a couple of weeks after those dirty pictures did in Miss Nevada, Miss New Jersey is stepping down. The Philadelphia Daily News is reporting in today’s edition that twenty-year-old Ashley Harder is resigning because she’s pregnant.”

[Television clip: CNN]

Reporter: “Miss California may soon be missing her title. It may be because of this: a photograph taken when Carrie Prejean says she was seventeen.”

Valenti: Maybe the only thing more all-American than our veneration of pure young women is our tradition of basking in their inevitable fall.

[Television clip: CNN]

Donald Trump: “Miss Nevada was a disaster. The pictures were disgusting.”

Valenti: America likes to sacrifice its virgins. It’s one of the ways we all participate as a culture in policing young women’s sexuality and reproducing the passive virgin ideal. And this is really what the purity myth is all about. It equates inaction with morality. It ties women’s ethics to our bodies, and it suggests that we can’t be moral actors on our own terms by means of our own agency. Instead, we’re defined by what we don’t do. Our ethics are the ethics of passivity.

FOREVER YOUNG

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Randy Wilson’s daughter (to her dad): “I just want to say thank you for living out what you teach and for making this event, the father-daughter purity ball, a lifestyle and an everyday thing.”

Jessica Valenti: There may be no better, or weirder, example of the virginity movement’s desire to infantilize women than the latest trend in virginity worship: purity balls.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Father at ball (staring into daughter’s eyes): “You truly are a blessing. God’s word says he knit you together in your mother’s womb.”

Another father (looking down at daughter): “Tonight, Emma, I would like to say to you that you will get farther in your walk with the lord and accomplish more for him...”

Valenti: Purity Balls are essentially daddy-daughter dances, usually featuring ballet around a wooden cross, where young girls at some point in the evening pledge their virginity to their fathers, and their fathers, in turn, pledge to protect their daughters’ purity at all costs. If these balls sound kind of old school, that’s because they really are. They’re as much about the power of fathers as they are about the purity of daughters.

Pastor Randy Wilson and his wife, Lisa, founded purity balls in 1998 in Colorado Springs.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Lisa Wilson: “We wanted to create an event that was so spectacular to the heart of a daughter with her father that that would be a turning point.”

Valenti: The Wilsons, who have seven children, five of them daughters, write in a letter to purity ball planners that they founded the balls because they saw that “the protection of the daughters’ purity rested on the shoulders of the fathers” – and they wanted to create an event that conveyed that sentiment.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Pastor Randy Wilson: “We’ll speak the first word, ‘I,’ and then I’ll wait for everybody to speak the names of their daughters. And then we’ll continue on. Is that all right? I’ve got five to say, so give me a little time here.”

Valenti: It’s hard to know what’s more problematic here.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Purity Ball Fathers (together): “I...”

Valenti: The pseudo-incestuous talk of covering...

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Purity Ball Fathers (together): “... choose before God to cover my daughters as her authority and protection in the area of purity.”

Valenti: ... or the antiquated notion that fathers own their daughters and their daughters’ sexuality.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Purity Ball Fathers (together): “I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide, and pray over my daughter, and my family, as the high priest of my home.”

Valenti: And that may be the most disturbing part of all of this: that even as the movement infantilizes young women and seeks to bring them under the control of traditional patriarchal authority, even as it equates women’s purity with the passive ideal of the innocent and childlike virgin, it simultaneously sexualizes girls and young women.

In one online video of a purity ball, the girls are asked to recite a virginity pledge as they hold onto symbolically unopened little pink boxes.

There’s even the creepy fact that the event is described as a date, and that the girls – some as young as six or seven years old – dress in ball gowns and often get their hair and makeup professionally done, making them look like wives next to their fathers.

[Television clip: “The Virgin Daughters”]

Randy Wilson (driving in car): “I’ve heard it said that they think I’m controlling, and I’m patriarchal, which they see as a negative. You know, I’m about my daughters growing up with as much liberty and freedoms as any other woman in society.”

Valenti: The bottom line is that while proponents of things like purity balls argue that they’re aiming to protect girls from sexualization, they’re actually doing exactly the opposite. By focusing on girls’ virginity, they’re positioning girls as sexual objects before they even hit puberty. And in this way, they’re actually enforcing the very problem they claim to want to fix.

[Film clip: *Lolita* – opening credits]

Valenti: In 2006, Playboy magazine listed *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov’s novel about a pedophile who falls in lust with his landlady’s 12-year-old daughter, as one of the “25 Sexiest Novels Ever Written.”

[Film: *Lolita*]

Woman: “I can offer you a comfortable home, a sunny garden, a congenial atmosphere, my cherry pies.”

Valenti: Now, I love Nabakov, and I thought *Lolita* was brilliant. But sexy? Molesting a 12-year-old?

[Film: *Lolita*]

Man: “You are a very persuasive salesman.”

Woman: “Thank you. What was the decisive factor? My garden?”

Man: “I think it was your cherry pies.” (*Close-up of young girl*)

Valenti: A recent report from the American Psychological Association confirmed what most of us already know: that there’s “ample evidence of the sexualization of women” across almost every form of media, and that most of this sexualization is focused on young women.

And sadly, it’s not just girls who are bearing the brunt of what author M. Gigi Durham calls the “Lolita Effect.” An alarming number of grown women seem to be so invested in this youthful sexual ideal that they’re going to some pretty radical extremes to live up to it as well.

[Television clip: “Flipping Out”]

Man (to Woman): “So, ideally, what would you like to do?”

Woman (to Man): “Can I have a reconstruction in my boo-boo?”

Man (to audience): “She said that she wanted her boo-boo redone, and what she’s referring to is vaginal rejuvenation surgery.”

Valenti: Vaginal rejuvenation is the fastest-growing form of plastic surgery in the United States.

[Television clip: “Strictly Sex With Dr. Drew”]

Dr. Drew (Narrator): “And so Janette is about to undergo a somewhat radical solution called hymenoplasty, an operation designed to restore her hymen and thereby, at least as far as she’s concerned, her virginity.”

Dr. Drew (to Janette): “What does that do as a woman? What does that give you back?”

Janette: “It’s not so much that it gives me back anything as much as it’s something that I can give to him.”

Valenti: The real disservice to women here is that while the plastic-surgery industry loves to frame this terrifying procedure as “empowering” to women, it’s hardly ever done for women’s pleasure – and almost always for either men’s physical pleasure or aesthetic acceptance.

[Television clip: “The 33 News”]

Reporter: “That was the case for this woman, who doesn’t want to be identified. We’ll call her ‘Lila.’ She’s been a virgin twice now, including recently when she underwent virginity repair surgery.”

Lila: “Well, the reason why I did it is because I come from a very old-fashioned family. So my family, of course, they raised me in a culture that I have to be a virgin and get married a virgin.”

Valenti: The myth of purity and the cult of youth are so embedded in some women’s psyches that they’re literally trying to turn back time. And that’s just the way the conservative leaders of the virginity movement like it. Because, in the broader sense, turning back time is exactly what this movement is all about.

LEGISLATING CHASTITY

[Internet video: Politician]

Rep. Eric Turner: “Someone who is desirous of an abortion could simply say that they’ve been raped or there’s incest.”

Jessica Valenti: Virginity movement extremists may sound ridiculous, but the results of their politics could not be more real. They’ve been wielding influence at the heart of the American political system to roll back a range of hard-won policies that affect women’s health. Take the controversy a few years ago surrounding Plan B, which is also known as the morning after pill or emergency contraception.

[Television clip: ABC News]

Reporter: “The morning after pill is a high dose of birth control drugs and is designed to prevent unintended pregnancies. Supporters call it an emergency contraceptive. Opponents say it’s equivalent to an abortion pill.”

Valenti: Virtually the entire scientific community agreed that it would be safe for the FDA to make the pill available to women without a prescription and argued that it would dramatically cut down on the number of unwanted pregnancies.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Hillary Rodham Clinton: “It should be available in emergency rooms when women are assaulted and raped. It should be available over-the-counter for women that are in need of it.”

Valenti: But social conservatives had other ideas and succeeded in blocking approval for three years.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Reporter: “The Plan B morning after pill has been at the center of a raging battle involving science, politics, the FDA, the Bush Administration, and Congress.”

Valenti: The official line from conservatives was that they opposed making Plan B more accessible for the same reasons they seem to oppose every other kind of women’s contraception.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Wendy Wright: “Our greatest concern about making Plan B over-the-counter is that it will end up harming women’s health and be especially dangerous to young women.”

Valenti: But behind their public statements about women’s health, the words of conservative political appointees within the FDA told a very different story.

Dr. David Hager, a leading Christian voice on women’s health and sexuality, appointed to the FDA’s Advisory Committee for Reproductive Health Drugs by President George W. Bush, told the New York Times that making Plan B available without a prescription would reward irresponsible women: “What we heard today was frequently about individuals who did not want to take responsibility for their actions and wanted a medication to relieve those consequences.”

This same guy had made waves previously when he wrote in a book, *Stress and the Woman’s Body*, that prayer and readings from scripture were viable treatments for PMS.

And then there was the internal FDA memo that came to light detailing how FDA official Janet Woodcock expressed concerns that over-the-counter status could lead to “extreme promiscuous behaviors” and “the medication taking on an ‘urban legend’ status that would lead adolescents to form sex-based cults centered around the use of Plan B.”

The FDA, which is only supposed to consider the safety and efficacy of drugs, was holding up a safe contraceptive because of a fear of teen sex cults.

But this has gone way beyond birth control.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Anchor: “Cancer vaccines. Cervical cancer kills four thousand women a year, but there’s now a vaccine that can prevent the sexually transmitted virus that causes the disease.”

Reporter: “Thirteen-year-old Emily is at her pediatrician’s office for a shot that, in some parts of the country, has become a political lightning rod.”

Pediatrician: “Hi, Emily.”

Emily: “Hi.”

Valenti: When the FDA had the opportunity to approve a safe and effective new vaccine that would prevent the Human Papilloma Virus, a widespread sexually transmitted disease responsible for almost three-quarters of all cervical cancer cases, it seemed like a no-brainer.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Parent: “If it’s going to save my daughters from cancer, to me, it’s a no-brainer.”

Valenti: 80 percent of parents wanted the vaccine for their daughters. This was about as clear a moral choice as you could get: support a new vaccine that would prevent cancer in women or fight against it to make a political point about purity.

But the virginity movement nicknamed it “The Promiscuity Vaccine,” and basically told parents it would turn their daughters into whores.

[Television clip: NBC News]

Reporter: “Opponents insist the vaccine will encourage promiscuity.”

Valenti: It would be one thing if this use of sex panic to wage a brazen attack on women’s health policy and our reproductive rights were the work of a few fringe lunatics. But it isn’t.

In the first quarter of 2011 alone, state legislators introduced 916 measures related to reproductive health and rights in the 49 legislatures that convened their regular sessions. And the Republican-led Congress has brought women’s issues back front and center.

[Television clip: C-Span]

Rep. Christopher Smith: “Planned Parenthood does more than 330,000 abortions each and every year. Each and every year. They are the largest provider – about a fourth of all the abortions in the United States. It’s child abuse.”

Valenti: They've painted the leading provider of basic health care for poor and working class women as a veritable abortion theme park that promotes promiscuity.

[Television clip: C-Span]

Rep. Steve King: "Neither shall we vote to fund Planned Parenthood. And I shall be looking for ways to unfund every other entity like them that promotes abortion or provides abortion as a matter of practice in their facilities. Planned Parenthood is invested in promiscuity."

Valenti: And then there was the movement's horrified reaction to news that the Obama administration would require health insurance companies to fully cover women's birth control and other basic preventive health care services.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Monica Crowley: "And now here we are talking about birth control in the context of free health care..."

Bill O'Reilly: "But they also get free breastfeeding support, counseling..."

Crowley: "Tubal ligations, domestic violence. Why is the government, in any way, shape or form, involved in any of this?"

Valenti: The idea that women would no longer have to shell out big co-pays for birth control, for health services like screenings for diseases, and for domestic violence counseling was just too much for the purity police.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Sean Hannity: "This isn't about women's health. This is about birth control."

Kimberly Guilfoyle: "Birth control, morning after pill, vasectomies, tubal ligation, and doctors are supposed to automatically ask about domestic violence. 'Are you being abused? What's going on in your life?' This has gotten completely out of hand."

Bill O'Reilly: "Is it the government's responsibility to take your hand and lead you through life? Aren't you concerned about the nanny state here?"

Valenti: And unfortunately, when it comes to the purity myth, parody is frequently indistinguishable from reality.

[Television clip: "The Colbert Report"]

Sandy Rios (from Fox News): "Why in the world would you encourage your daughters and your granddaughters, and whoever else comes behind you, to have unrestricted, unlimited sex anytime, anywhere?"

Stephen Colbert: “Yeah. Why? Because hickory-smoked lady and I know that if we give your daughters and granddaughters access to birth control they will instantly turn into wanton harlots with an insatiable sexual appetite. Because you know women, they’re always on the edge of nympho-maniacal orgiastic abandon. They’ll pick up the prescription, pop a pill, then bone the pharmacist, the stock boy, and everybody in line for the bus. Why? Because the birth control was paid for by the government.”

Valenti: And this movement to undercut women’s autonomy hasn’t been limited to birth control or abortion and choice. Amazingly, it’s also extended to the one issue where women by definition have no choice: rape.

[Television clip: CNN]

Reporter: “The talk among some of these students, they’re saying that some people are actually blaming the victim, saying that she was drunk and she shouldn’t have done that.”

Valenti: After nearly forty years of political struggle and organizing by feminists, it always seems to come down to pure, virginal girls worthy of our sympathy, and slutty, reckless ones who should have known better. This is why you hear so many virginity movement front-liners making the case that the only women who can be truly raped are the chaste ones.

[Internet video: Tennessee Senate]

State Senator Douglas Henry: “Rape, ladies and gentlemen, is not today what rape was. Rape, when I was learning these things, was the violation of a chaste woman.”

Valenti: And if it’s only pure women who can be raped, then most women who are sexually assaulted are out of luck.

[Television clip: PBS]

Bill Napoli: “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 could possibly make it, and is impregnated.”

Valenti: So long as our morality is defined by our sexuality, women will continue to be blamed for the violence men do to them.

[Television clip: “Issues with Jane Velez-Mitchell”]

Jane Velez-Mitchell: “He says he doesn’t believe ‘rape victims’ exist. Yes, you heard me right. State Representative Bobby Franklin says he doesn’t like the phrase ‘rape victim,’ and if he has his way, they’d be called ‘rape accusers.’ Are you kidding me, mister?”

Valenti: This mentality starts to make sense when you realize it's part of a larger worldview that sees men – and the traditional male order – as under siege from feminism and the forces of political correctness.

[Radio clip: “Savage Nation”]

Michael Savage: “Here you have a drunken slut-stripping whore accusing men of raping her when there is absolutely no evidence of such a rape other than what comes out of that filthy mouth of hers. What kind of system do we have that anyone can scream ‘rape’ and not have to show her face, not answer to the public, and yet those she accuses are suddenly guilty until they’re proven innocent? This is all the product of the out-of-control lesbian feminist movement.”

Valenti: It's pretty simple, actually. You're not likely to identify with women as victims if you believe they've got too much power in the first place.

[Television clip: Fox News]

Trace Gallagher: “Cops say she was tied up, raped, strangled, and suffocated – a grad student in New York City found dead two weeks ago after a night out with friends.”

Valenti: When a 24-year-old graduate student named Imette St. Guillen was kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered in New York City, Naomi Schaefer Riley, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, captured this sentiment about as clearly as you can. Riley adopted the classic virginity movement line that St. Guillen “should have known better” than to go out drinking late at night, and she explicitly blamed feminism for St. Guillen’s lack of common sense and bad behavior.

“Feminism may be partly to blame,” she wrote. Because it’s made “drinking a gender equity issue” and told women “they have as much right as the next guy to belly up to the bar” by convincing them they should “be liberated from social constraints.”

But the big, glaring problem with this line of reasoning is that women’s “responsibility” has nothing to do with sexual assault. Women don’t get raped because they were drinking or took drugs. Women don’t get raped because they weren’t careful enough. Women don’t get raped because of what they were wearing, or because they’re not virgins, or because of feminism. A woman gets raped because a rapist raped her.

CONCLUSION

Jessica Valenti: The truth is that women are so much more than our ability to have – or not have – sex. We’re more than virgins and whores. We’re students, we’re activists, we’re parents, we’re workers, we’re people who care about the world around us. What we need to do is continue to spread the word that women are more than the sum of our sexual parts, and that our ability to be good people has to do with our kindness, our compassion, and our social engagement – not our bodies. We can’t accept any less for any longer.

[End]