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Offensive Feminism: The Conservative Gender Norms That Perpetuate Rape Culture, and How Feminists Can Fight Back

BY **JILL FILIPOVIC**

“Rape, ladies and gentlemen, is not today what rape was. Rape, when I was learning these things, was the violation of a chaste woman, against her will, by some party not her spouse. Today it’s simply, ‘Let’s don’t go forward with this act.’”

—Tennessee State Senator Doug Henry, February 2008

SENATOR HENRY IS RIGHT: Rape today is not what it once was. Raping your wife is now a criminal offense. A rape survivor’s sexual history cannot be used to discredit her in court. Acquaintance rape (or date rape) has gained greater visibility, and the stranger-in-the-bushes model of sexual assault is no longer the only one we recognize. And feminist activism around sexual assault has been phenomenally successful—rape crisis centers have been built, laws have been changed, and men’s assumption of power over women has been challenged. As a result, sexual assault rates have steadily decreased, and survivors have greater resources.

But there remain creeping challenges even to the modest gains that anti-rape activists have achieved. The most effective—and perhaps the least visible, at least where rape is concerned—is the right-wing offensive on female autonomy. While religious conservatives

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are obvious foot soldiers in the War on Sex and in the anti-abortion and anti-contraception movements, their role in maintaining and even promoting rape culture is too often overlooked. In truth, the organized religious right—which, to be clear, is not the same thing as individual religious or conservative Americans—is waging a culture war that is about much more than which god you pray to or whether you value fetal life over reproductive choice. It is a war over the most basic of values: the human rights to bodily autonomy and self-determination, the role of women in society, and the construction of the family. And while abortion and same-sex marriage are the hot-button political issues, rape is smack dab in the middle of the battle. The conservative status quo is most threatened not just by traditional anti-rape laws, but by putting the onus on men *not* to rape, and by a feminist model of enthusiastic consent, in which women are viewed as autonomous actors empowered to request *or* decline sex—a model where “no” is respected and “yes” is an equally valid response.

The Good Old Days

“We have forgotten that before we began calling this date rape and date fraud, we called it exciting.”

—Warren Farrell, men’s rights activist and
author of *The Myth of Male Power*

Under old English and American law, “Husband and wife are one, and that one is the husband.”¹ Coverture laws required that a woman’s legal rights were merged with her husband’s; even long after those regulations were obsolete, women still lacked equal rights in marriage, as they were required to be sexually available to their husbands—with no laws against marital rape, husbands could demand (or force) sex with no legal repercussions. A woman’s place as a personal servant for her husband in exchange for financial

security was enshrined into law. According to family historian Stephanie Coontz:

“Even after coverture had lost its legal force, courts, legislators, and the public still cleaved to the belief that marriage required husbands and wives to play totally different domestic roles. In 1958, the New York Court of Appeals rejected a challenge to the traditional legal view that wives (unlike husbands) couldn’t sue for loss of the personal services, including housekeeping and the sexual attentions, of their spouses. The judges reasoned that only wives were expected to provide such personal services anyway.

As late as the 1970s, many American states retained ‘head and master’ laws, giving the husband final say over where the family lived and other household decisions. According to the legal definition of marriage, the man was required to support the family, while the woman was obligated to keep house, nurture children, and provide sex. Not until the 1980s did most states criminalize marital rape. Prevailing opinion held that when a bride said, ‘I do,’ she was legally committed to say, ‘I will’ for the rest of her married life.”²

These ideas are not nearly obsolete. In practice, many American couples have fairly egalitarian, progressive marriages—including conservative and religious couples. But a small yet incredibly powerful minority of conservative extremists is unhappy with the shift toward gender equality and the idea that a woman maintains her bodily integrity even after there’s a ring on her finger. Arguments for “traditional marriage” still rely on opposite-sex partners and an assumption of complementary roles—and those “complementary” roles assume that the man is in charge and the woman complements him. Regressive gender roles (and the need for complementary relationships) are among the most common arguments against marriage equality.³ And old ideas about the requirement of female sexual availability are far from dead. Anti-feminist activist Phyllis

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Schlafly—who has made a highly lucrative career out of telling other women to stay home—told students at Bates College, “By getting married, the woman has consented to sex, and I don’t think you can call it rape.”⁴

This ideology isn’t limited to a few wacky conservatives, either; we teach it in public schools. According to a report by U.S. Representative Harry Waxman that evaluated the most widely used abstinence-only curricula, girls are regularly described as dependent and submissive, and are even discussed as objects to be purchased or otherwise attained:

“In a discussion of wedding traditions, one curriculum writes: ‘Tell the class that the Bride price is actually an honor to the bride. It says she is valuable to the groom and he is willing to give something valuable for her.’”⁵

And religious events like Purity Balls involve daughters pledging their virginity to their fathers until their wedding day, when ‘I give myself as a wedding gift to my husband.’ The father pledges, ‘I, [daughter’s name]’s father, choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity.’⁶ This hymenal exchange is represented by a ‘promise ring’ that a father gives his daughter, which she wears until it is replaced by a wedding ring. The religious, abstinence-promoting groups that organize Purity Balls are bankrolled by the federal government—the Bush administration funds abstinence initiatives to the tune of \$200 million a year.’⁷

Central to the right-wing family ideal is the position of women as servants and helpmeets, not autonomous actors or individuals in their own right. The very concept of individualism is a threat. Opposition to individualism and female bodily autonomy are crucial components to the so-called “pro-family” movement—even as most American families embrace the very values and achievements that conservative groups seek to dismantle.

The Female Problem

The biggest threat to the conservative traditional ideal? Women. Time and again, when women have the ability to plan their families, they do. When women have the right to open their own checking accounts, to make their own money, to go to school, to have sex without fearing pregnancy, to own property, to have children when they want, to marry whom they want, *they do*. When you extend human rights to women, they act like human beings with individual needs, ambitions, and desires—just like men.

A lot of women also have sex “like men”—that is, for pleasure. Ninety-seven percent of Americans will have sex before marriage, and 95 percent of American women will use contraception at some point in their lives. The average American woman spends about three decades trying to prevent pregnancy. Clearly, women like sex—and they like it on their own terms and for recreation, not just for baby making.

And therein lies the problem. Sex, in the conservative mindset, is essentially a bartering tool and a means to an end: A woman maintains her virginity until it can be exchanged for a wedding ring. After that, the family economy is simple: Women give sex, housework, and reproduction in exchange for financial security and social status, and sex is purely for reproductive purposes. The idea that women might want to have sex for pleasure without having to carry a pregnancy for nine months afterward and then raise a child is quite contrary to conservative values. So is the idea that a woman might have the right to say no to sex within marriage. Bodily autonomy doesn't figure into the scheme because, as the conservative group Focus on the Family says on its website, “It's Not My Body.”

While right-wing groups certainly don't come out in *support* of rape, they do promote an extremist ideology that *enables* rape and promotes a culture where sexual assault is tacitly accepted.

YES MEANS YES

The supposedly “pro-family” marital structure, in which sex is exchanged for support and the woman’s identity is absorbed into her husband’s, reinforces the idea of women as property and as simple accoutrements to a man’s more fully realized existence. And the traditional gender roles so exalted by conservative groups—roles that envision women as passive receptacles and men as aggressive deviants—further excuse and endorse sexual assault.

Manly Men and Passive Women

“To resist rape a woman needs more than martial arts and more than the police; she needs a certain ladylike modesty enabling her to take offense at unwanted encroachment.”

—Harvard Professor Harvey Mansfield,
author of the book *Manliness*

At the heart of the sexual assault issue is how mainstream American culture constructs sex and sexualities along gendered lines. Female sexuality is portrayed as passive, while male sexuality is aggressive. Sex itself is constructed around both the penis and male pleasure—male/female intercourse begins when a man penetrates a woman’s vagina with his penis, and ends when he ejaculates. Penetration is the key element of sex, with the man imaged as the “active” partner and the woman as the passive, receptive partner. And sex is further painted as something that men *do to* women, instead of as a mutual act between two equally powerful actors.

But the myth of passivity is not the only cultural narrative about female sexuality. Women are simultaneously thought of as living in inherently tempting bodies, and using those bodies to cause men to fall.⁸ These two myths—the passive woman and the tempting woman—have been used to justify the social control of half the population for centuries. The biblical fall was caused by a woman, and her punishment was painful female sexuality and

suffering in reproduction.⁹ We have hardly seen reprieve since. In Western societies, women have been cloistered away, been deemed alternately “frigid” or “hysterical,”¹⁰ undergone clitoridectomies as girls to “cure” chronic masturbation,¹¹ been barred from accessing contraception and even information about pregnancy prevention,¹² been the legal property of men, been forcibly and nonconsensually sterilized,¹³ and been legally forced to continue pregnancies they did not want.¹⁴ The ideas of the female body (and, specifically, female sexual organs and reproductive capacity) as public property and as open to state control persist today, as abortion and contraception remain hot-button issues and the anti-choice right promotes policies that would give a fetus rights that no born person even has.¹⁵ The message is simple: Women are “naturally” passive until you give them a little bit of power—then all hell breaks loose and they have to be reined in by any means necessary. Rape and other assaults on women’s bodies—and particularly infringements and attacks on women’s reproductive organs—serve as unique punishments for women who step out of line.

Male sexuality, and maleness in general, are socially enforced by requiring men to be Not Women. Men who transgress and exhibit characteristics that are traditionally associated with femaleness—passivity, gentleness, willingness to be sexually penetrated—have their masculinity questioned. The most obvious example is gay men, who are routinely characterized as “effeminate” for transgressing the boundaries of gender and of the act of sex itself.

Aggression is such a deeply entrenched characteristic of maleness that it is often justified through references to nature and evolutionary biology. It further bleeds over into the sexual sphere, wherein men are expected to be aggressive sexual actors attempting to “get” sex from passive women who both hold and embody sex itself.

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In the ongoing effort to paint men and women as opposites, men take on the role of sexual aggressor and women are expected to be sexually evasive. While virginity until marriage is practiced by very few women, deeply held standards of female virtuousness remain, and women are rarely taught how to say yes to sex, or how to act out their own desires. Rather, we are told that the rules of sexual engagement involve men pushing and women putting on the brakes.

While this clearly compromises women's sexual subjectivity, it also handicaps men and prevents them from connecting with their own desires. Men are as well versed in the sexual dance as women are, and when they are fully aware that women are expected to say no even when they mean yes, men are less likely to hear "no" and accept it at face value. When society equates maleness with a constant desire for sex, men are socialized out of genuine sexual decision making, and are less likely to be able to know how to say no or to be comfortable refusing sex when they don't want it. And the "boys will be boys" sexual stereotype makes it much easier for date rapists to victimize women and simply argue that they didn't *know* they were raping someone—sure, she said no, but it's awfully easy for men to convince other men (and lots of women) that "no" is just part of the game.

The Feminist Challenge

Feminism and anti-rape activism challenge the dominant narrative that women's bodies aren't our own, they insist that sex is about consent and enjoyment, not violence and harm, and they attack a power structure that sees women as victims and men as predators. Feminists insist that men are not animals. Instead, men are rational human beings fully capable of listening to their partners and understanding that sex isn't about pushing someone to do something they don't want to do. Plenty of men are able to grasp the

idea that sex should be entered into joyfully and enthusiastically by both partners, and that an absence of “no” isn’t enough—“yes” should be the baseline requirement. And women are not empty vessels to be fucked or not fucked; we’re sexual actors who should absolutely have the ability to say yes when we want it, just like men, and should feel safe saying no—even if we’ve been drinking, even if we’ve slept with you before, even if we’re wearing tight jeans, even if we’re naked in bed with you. Anti-rape activists further understand that men need to feel empowered to say no also. If women have the ability to fully and freely say yes, and if we established a model of enthusiastic consent instead of just “no means no,” it would be a lot harder for men to get away with rape. It would be a lot harder to argue that there’s a “gray area.” It would be a lot harder to push the idea that “date rape” is less serious than “real” rape, that women who are assaulted by acquaintances were probably teased, that what is now called “date rape” used to just be called “seduction.”

But building that model requires us to dismantle traditional notions of female sexuality and femininity itself. Doing that poses a direct threat to male power, and the female subordination it relies on.

A Culture of Fear

So why *do* some conservative extremists—and even some regular folks—want to maintain a culture that enables and promotes rape? Quite simply, because women pose a threat to entrenched power structures, and the constant threat of rape keeps both men and women in line.

The social construction of rape suffers from a marked disconnect from the reality of rape. Sexual assault is routinely depicted along the stranger-rape storyline, despite the fact that 73 percent of sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows.¹⁶

Further, rape victims are almost always depicted as female, despite the fact that one in thirty-three men will survive sexual assault.¹⁷ Prison populations are especially at risk, and especially invisible—while statistics are hard to come by, conservative estimates suggest more than three-hundred thousand men are sexually assaulted behind bars every year.¹⁸ Assaults on male inmates are seen as somehow not as wrong as the stranger-rape of women, perhaps because we have little sympathy for convicted criminals (a significant proportion of whom are not violent, thanks to punitive drug laws), or because men of color make up a disproportionate percentage of prison populations and the experiences of incarcerated brown and black men are generally deemed unimportant. Men, then—even men who are likely to be assaulted—are left out of the narrative of fear that women live. The one aspect of the rape narrative that actually reflects reality is the fact that 99 percent of rapes are perpetrated by men.¹⁹

Unlike other forms of assault or even murder, rape is both a crime and a tool of social control. The stranger-rape narrative is crucial in using the threat of sexual assault to keep women afraid, and to punish women who step out of the traditionally female private sphere and into the traditionally male-dominated public one. Portraying rape as something that happens outside of a woman's home enforces the idea that women are safe in the domestic realm, and at risk if they go out.

There exists a long history of conflating female exodus from the home with female sexual availability—for quite a long time, the “public woman” was a prostitute. The defining feature of the “common woman” sex worker was “not the exchange of money, not even multiple sexual partners, but the public and indiscriminate availability of a woman's body.”²⁰ Public and outspoken women today are still routinely called “whores” as a way of discrediting them. Street harassment remains a widespread method of reminding women that

they have less of a right to move through public space than men do. And rape serves as the ultimate punishment for women who move through public space without patriarchal covering.

While the threat of rape has hardly kept women indoors, it does keep women fearful. If a woman is raped by a stranger, her decisions are immediately called into question—why was she walking alone, why was she in that neighborhood, why did she drink so much? If she is raped by someone she knows, her actions are similarly evaluated, and the question of whether it was “really” rape is inevitably raised—why did she go out with him if she didn’t want sex, why did she invite him up to her room, why did she go to a frat party, why did she drink wine at dinner, why did she consent to some sexual activity if she didn’t want to consent to all of it?

Men are 150 percent more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than women are.²¹ Men are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of crimes. Men are more likely to be assaulted, injured, or killed when alcohol is involved. Men are more likely to be victimized by a stranger (63 percent of violent victimizations), whereas women are more likely to be victimized by someone they know (62 percent of violent victimizations). Women are more likely to be victimized in their home or in the home of someone they know, whereas men are more likely to be victimized in public.²²

And yet it is women who are treated to “suggestions” about how to protect themselves from public stranger assaults: go out with a friend, don’t drink too much, don’t walk home alone, take a self-defense class. Well-meaning as they may be, such suggestions send the false message that women can prevent rape. Certainly, on an individual basis, self-defense and other trainings do help women to protect themselves. But while these trainings are invaluable for the women they assist, they place all of the responsibility on the individual women who use them—in other words, they are not the answer to dismantling rape culture.

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The focus on the victim's behavior, rather than the perpetrator's, sends the message that a woman must be eternally on guard, lest she bring sexual assault onto herself. This message adds to a broader view of women as vulnerable, keeping women fearful and justifying paternalistic and sexist laws and customs. As media critic Laura Kipnis writes:

“Given the vast number of male prison rapes and the declining number of female nonprison rapes, it seems as though the larger social story about sexual vulnerability is due to be altered. It is, after all, a story upon which a good chunk of gender identity hinges, including a large part of what it feels like to be a woman: endangered.”²³

The “if only she had . . .” response to rape serves the valuable psychological purpose of allowing other women to temporarily escape that sense of endangerment. If we convince ourselves that we would never have done what she did, that her choices opened her up to assault and we would have behaved differently, then we can feel safe.

But it's a strategy that is bound to fail. The threat of rape holds women—all women—hostage. Obviously, women and men need to take common-sense measures to avoid all sorts of victimization, but the emphasis on rape as a pervasive and constant threat is crucial to maintaining female vulnerability and male power. That narrative, though, does more than just paralyze women—it privileges men. The benefits that stem from the simple ability to *not live in fear* are impossible to quantify. Certainly many, if not most, men have no desire to keep women afraid, but there are some whose goals necessitate a fearful and compliant female population. How else will they justify keeping women under their thumbs under the guise of “protection”?

Conservative “pro-family” activists envision a world in which men are in control, both in the public realm and at home. But the

natural desire for freedom and autonomy exists in women, and has always been nearly impossible to smother with bribery (the carrot of the wedding and the family and the home) alone. The stick also has to come out, and that's where the pervasive threat of rape (or otherwise losing one's "virtue") comes into play. Certainly, the threat of rape as a tool of social control was not created by anti-feminist conservatives; that threat, however, is an important weapon in the culture war they are waging against equality.

A Feminist Response to Sexual Assault

An improved response to rape requires a broad-based approach, and involves challenging the entire right-wing agenda: the wars on sex, on women's bodies, on the poor, on people of color. Sexual assault simply cannot be removed from its broader context, and as long as powerful people continue to promote a worldview that requires women to be second-class citizens—and as long as that view is bolstered by policies that literally subjugate women's bodies and by social codes that render women passive and men aggressive—women will not be safe.

A second crucial prong of anti-rape activism must simply be teaching men not to rape. Ridiculous and simplistic as it may sound—after all, criminals will commit crimes, and would anyone consider lowering the murder rate by “teaching men not to murder”?—sexual assault is more caught up in gender stereotypes and intimate relationships than most other violent crimes are. The “teach men not to rape” method will admittedly be entirely unsuccessful in combating stranger rape. It will certainly not eradicate acquaintance rape or intimate-partner rape, either, but it very well might decrease it.

Teaching men not to rape involves addressing the disconnect between men who commit sexual assault and men who self-identify as rapists. It is both a social and an institutional process that requires

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accurately representing the reality of sexual assault (dismantling the stranger-rape and the women-should-be-fearful narratives), developing positive masculinities, and teaching boys (in sex education classes and through legal standards) that forcing a woman to have sex with you *is rape*. If we are to bridge the divide between how women experience rape and how some men define it—and how they define it as something apart from sexual activities that may be ordinary parts of manhood—we need to eliminate the idea that rape must involve extreme violence. Instead, we need to recognize that rape is unique because it takes a natural and usually pleasurable act and turns it into an act of violence. Context, as much as the act itself, matters.

We must also take broader steps toward gender equality. As feminism has seen greater and greater success, the sexual assault rate has decreased. Sexual assault is not only a crime of violence and power, but also one of entitlement. So long as men feel entitled to dominate and control women's bodies, sexual assault will continue. While issues like reproductive justice may initially seem unrelated to sexual assault, they are a crucial aspect of women's bodily autonomy and integrity—legally forcing a woman to carry a pregnancy for nine months and give birth against her will and without her consent, or coercing certain kinds of “unfit” women into not reproducing, are deeply troubling uses of women's bodies to serve the needs, ideologies, and desires of others. Allowing women a full range of reproductive freedoms affirms the fact that women's bodies are private property, and that their sexual and reproductive choices should not be forced or coerced.

We must work with women, too, but not in the traditional way of warning women away from moving through public space and engaging in normal social behaviors like drinking or going to bars and parties. Rather, we must emphasize a pleasure-affirming vision of female sexuality, wherein saying yes and no are equally valid moral

decisions in many sexual contexts—and wherein women not only are answering the question, but also feel equally entitled to ask for and initiate sex when they want it and their partner agrees.

We need to situate sexual assault within the greater cultural battles over women's bodies, and recognize that anti-rape activism cannot be separated from action for reproductive freedom, anti-racism, LGBT rights, and broader gender equality; and that the opponents of those movements are the same people who have an interest in maintaining rape culture.

Eradicating rape may very well be impossible. But as long as we continue to view it as a crime committed by an individual against another individual, absent of any social context, we will have little success in combating it. Women must feel fully entitled to public engagement and consensual sex—and if conservative and anti-feminist men continue to argue that women's very public presence enables men to assault them, then perhaps they're the ones who should be pressured to stay home.

If you want to read more about MEDIA MATTERS, try:

- A Woman's Worth **BY JAVACIA N. HARRIS**
- How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman? **BY KATE HARDING**
- The Fantasy of Acceptable "Non-Consent": Why the Female Sexual Submissive Scares Us (and Why She Shouldn't) **BY STACEY MAY FOWLES**

If you want to read more about THE RIGHT IS WRONG, try:

- Toward a Performance Model of Sex **BY THOMAS MACAULAY MILLAR**
- Purely Rape: The Myth of Sexual Purity and How It Reinforces Rape Culture **BY JESSICA VALENTI**

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SEXUAL POWER
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WITHOUT RAPE

Jaclyn Friedman & Jessica Valenti

FOREWORD BY MARGARET CHO

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Friedman Valenti

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Yes Means Yes

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