

# The Washington Post

## For women in America, equality is still an illusion

Advertisement

By Jessica Valenti

Sunday, February 21, 2010; B02

Every day, we hear about the horrors women endure in other countries: [rape in Darfur](#), [genital mutilation](#) in Egypt, [sex trafficking](#) in Eastern Europe. We shake our heads, forward e-mails and send money.

We have no problem condemning atrocities done to women abroad, yet too many of us in the United States ignore the oppression on our doorstep. We're suffering under the mass delusion that women in America have achieved equality.

And why not -- it's a feel-good illusion. We cry with Oprah and laugh with Tina Fey; we work and take care of our children; we watch Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice proudly and sigh with relief, believing we've come so far. But we're basking in a "girl power" moment that doesn't exist -- it's a mirage of equality that we've been duped into believing is the real thing.

Because despite the indisputable gains over the years, women are still being raped, trafficked, violated and discriminated against -- not just in the rest of the world, but here in the United States. And though feminists continue to fight gender injustices, most people seem to think that outside of a few lingering battles, the work of the women's movement is done.

It's time to stop fooling ourselves. For all our "empowered" rhetoric, women in this country aren't doing nearly as well as we'd like to think.

After all, women are being shot dead in the streets here, too. It was only last year that George Sodini opened fire in a gym outside Pittsburgh, killing three women and injuring nine others. Investigators learned from Sodini's blog that [he specifically targeted women](#). In 2006, a gunman went into [an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania](#); he sent the boys outside and opened fire on almost a dozen girls, killing five. That same year in Colorado, a man [sexually assaulted six female students](#) he had taken hostage at a high school before killing one of them.

And it's not just strangers who are killing women; more than 1,000 women were killed by their partners in 2005, and of all the women murdered in the United States, about a third are killed by a husband or boyfriend. A leading cause of death for pregnant women? Murder by a partner.

In Iraq, women serving in the military are more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire.

Even the government underestimates the crisis American women are in. Last year the [Justice Department reported](#) that there were 182,000 sexual assaults committed against women in 2008, which would mean that the rate had decreased by 70 percent since 1993. But a study by the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center showed that the Justice Department's methodology was flawed. Instead of behaviorally based questions, such as "Has anyone ever forced you to have sex?", women were asked if they had been subject to "rape, attempted or other type of sexual attack." Victims often don't label their experience as "rape," especially when someone they know attacked them. The center says the actual number of U.S. women raped in 2008 was more than 1 million.

The distressing statistics don't stop with violence: Women hold 17 percent of the seats in Congress; abortion is legal, but more than 85 percent of counties in the United States have no provider; women work outside the home, but they make about 76 cents to a man's dollar and make up the majority of Americans living in

poverty.

This is a far cry from progress; it's an epidemic of sexism. So where's the outrage? When my co-bloggers and I write at [Feministing.com](http://Feministing.com) about the hurdles American women face, a common criticism is that if we cared about women's rights, we'd focus on countries where women are actually oppressed -- that women here have it too good to complain. When I speak on college campuses, I'm sometimes asked the same question (generally by a male student): What are you complaining about? Women are doing terrific!

In her upcoming book, author Susan Douglas calls this "enlightened sexism." She writes that the appearance of equality -- from "girl power" to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" -- is a dangerous distraction from the pervasiveness of sexism.

So why the blinders? Most women know that sexism exists. But between the glittery illusion Douglas refers to and the ongoing feminist backlash, it's not surprising that so many women don't realize how dire their situation is. Organizations such as the Independent Women's Forum, for example, exist to tell women that equality is actually bad for them. In a 2007 opinion article in The Washington Post headlined "[A Bargain At 77 Cents to a Dollar](#)," the forum's Carrie Lukas wrote that the wage gap is simply "a trade-off" for holding jobs with "personal fulfillment." The organization's campus program argues against Title IX, the law that prohibits sex discrimination at educational institutions. Between pop culture and politics, women are being taught that everything is fine and dandy -- and a lot of us are buying it.

Part of this unwillingness to see misogyny in America could be self-protection -- perhaps the truth is too scary to face. Or maybe American women are simply loath to view themselves as oppressed, and it's easier to look at women in other countries as the real victims. This isn't to say that international misogyny isn't a problem; of course it is. And many women in America do have it easier than women in other parts of the world. But this isn't a zero-sum game, and we can fight for our rights while fighting for women internationally as well.

In fact, our successes could help women abroad. The recent increase in the number of female ambassadors globally has been dubbed [the "Hillary effect"](#) -- the idea that our secretary of state's visibility has opened doors for women in other countries. And perhaps if the pay gap here were closed, women would have more money to spend on causes overseas. It's time to do away with the either-or mentality that surrounds domestic and international women's rights.

Fortunately, a vibrant feminist movement is still at large in the United States, taking on issues from reproductive justice and racism to pay equity and motherhood. But feminists cannot pick up the sexist slack on their own, and recent mainstream conversations -- such as when singer [Rihanna was assaulted by her then-boyfriend Chris Brown](#), or when Clinton and Sarah Palin were the [targets of sexism](#) during the 2008 campaign -- have been far too civilized for the mess that we're in.

We act as if the hatred directed at women is something that can be dealt with by a stern talking to, as if the misogyny embedded in our culture is an unruly child rather than systematic oppression. Yes, women today fare better than our foremothers. But the benchmarks so often cited -- the right to vote, working outside the home, laws that make domestic violence illegal -- don't change the reality of women's lives. They don't prevent 1 million women from being raped, female troops from being assaulted or the continued legal discrimination against gay and transgender people. And seriously, are American women really supposed to be satisfied with the most basic rights of representation? Thrilled that our country has deigned to consider us fully human?

There is so much more work to be done. The truth is, most women don't have the privilege of being able to look at gender justice from a distance; they have no choice but to live it every day. Those of us who are lucky enough not to have to think about sexism, racism, poverty and homophobia on a daily basis -- those of us who have the privilege of sending money to an international cause via e-mail while ignoring the plight of women here at home -- have a responsibility to open our eyes to the misogyny right in front of us. And then to stop it.

*Jessica Valenti* is the author of *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* and the founder of *Feministing.com*.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

### Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

### Sponsored Links

#### Hot Stock Alert - EHSI

Profit From Healthcare Explosion New Millionaires Created Today  
[www.EmergingHealthcareSolutionsInc.com](http://www.EmergingHealthcareSolutionsInc.com)

#### Treatment for Sciatica

AccuraScope™ - Minimally Invasive Procedure for Long-Term Results!  
[www.NorthAmericanSpine.com](http://www.NorthAmericanSpine.com)

#### Say "NO" to BOTOX!

See how a Mom combined 2 products & made her wrinkles vanish for \$3\*  
[www.ws1alerts.com](http://www.ws1alerts.com)

[Buy a link here](#)

© 2010 The Washington Post Company