

Shame and the Modern Woman: How Slut-Shaming Hurts You!



What two words strike terror in the hearts of most women today? What two words have helped to shape the roles of women in society and the whole of human history? What two words carry enough power to not only lower women’s self-esteem but make them especially vulnerable to perpetrations of every kind? What two words are the last words many women have heard just before being raped or murdered?

Slut and Whore.

These two words have been used for millennia to shame women from all walks of life. They have often been used to justify all manner of ill treatment, including rape and murder. Maybe you have personal experience with these two words?

I do. In fact, I have many, many times used these words to refer to myself over the last 25 years. I have even taken it on as something of a crusade. My mission is to gut the destructive power of these two words. Because despite the hip hop lyrics intoning these words like some ancient mantra, “slut” and “whore” still possess the power to destroy the lives of individual women and even young girls.

She was only 13-years-old, in 2009, when the words “whore” and “slut” were hurled her way, and Hope Witsell of Sundance, Florida was not prepared for the crushing sense of shame which those words carry. She hung herself in her bedroom.

Phoebe Prince was just fifteen when she relocated from Ireland to Massachusetts and enjoyed a very brief romance with a football player from her new high school. For this she was bullied with insults including “Irish slut,” and perhaps all too predictably, she too hung herself in her bedroom in 2010.

Twelve-year-old Gabrielle Molina of Queens Village, New York, was repeatedly called a “slut and a whore” by at least one of her classmates before she took her own life by hanging herself in 2013.

And then there’s Rehtaeh Parsons. Age fifteen and drunk on vodka, she was gang raped by four older boys who circulated a photo of their crime online. For two years Rehtaeh endured cyber bullying and being labeled a “slut” by her classmates. Finally, the stress and shame was too much to bear. In 2013, like an increasing number of teen girls, she hung herself.

Sadly, teen suicides have been on the rise in recent years. I find it deeply disturbing that much of the increase has occurred in girls ages ten to nineteen. While firearms used to be the favored method of suicide for both girls and boys, girls are increasingly choosing to commit suicide by hanging themselves. The Centers for Disease Control doesn’t have an explanation for the rise in teen girl suicides. But I can’t help but wonder if the increase in suicides among teenage girls has something to do with the unique pressures of entering puberty as a female in today’s world.

Today’s teen girls are subject to more conflicting messages surrounding their sexuality than any generation before them. While popular media invites girls to dress and act “sexy,” girls are simultaneously warned to avoid a “bad reputation.” Somehow, young girls are supposed to figure out where the line between a “good girl” and a “bad girl” is, usually without any meaningful assistance from the adults in their lives. And it’s no wonder help is so often lacking, since most adult

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men and women are just as confused and conflicted on the topic of what constitutes “appropriate” behavior for today’s sexually active and expressive females.

While no one seems to know for sure just what constitutes a “bad girl,” “whore” or “slut,” we still ascribe enormous power to these sexist labels. I find it outrageous that we still classify girls and women as “good girls” and “bad girls” - as either “respectable” and worthy of our protection, or as “sluts and whores” who deserve our derision and punishment. It seems we still, as a culture, blindly enforce the Whore/Madonna dichotomy -- even though it leads to misery for women of all ages.

The ways in which slut-shaming and whore-bashing affect all women and girls are many and varied. Yet each has at its core the assumption that female sexuality is dangerous and must be controlled. Cyber bullying, a product of the digital age, may not at first seem to be related to something as archaic as honor killings. But slut-shaming and whore-bashing young girls until they commit suicide, like honor killings, are brutal examples of the damage that is inflicted on women and girls by sexual shaming.

Honor killings are supposedly based upon the idea that a family’s “honor” can only be restored by the murder of a woman or girl who is believed to have violated that family’s and/or community’s standards for acceptable behavior for females. The behavior which is sanctioned is almost always sexual, and violations range in severity from minor flirtations to wearing revealing clothing to unwed pregnancies. What each murdered victim shares is the fact that they are perceived as a “slut” or “whore” who has brought shame upon those connected to them.

You might think honor killings only afflict Muslim countries. But former member of the Dutch Parliament and activist, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, would like to change your mind about that. She is on a mission to expose the rise of honor killings in the West. In her *Huffington Post* column she quotes the defiant words of an Afghan father convicted of an “honor” killing in which he took the life of his three daughters and his wife in Ontario, Canada. What did these women do that in his mind justified their murders? The father said...

“They betrayed Islam” by consorting with boys, posing seductively for cell phone photographs, and refusing to wear the hijab. “God’s curse on them for generations. May the devil (expletive) on their graves. Is that what a daughter should be? Would a daughter be such a whore?”

How many such killings occur in Europe and the United States? Accurate numbers are difficult to obtain

because many “honor” killings are simply recorded as murder. However the UN estimates that such killings are far more prevalent than generally believed. In a 2010 statement, the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, stated:

“In the name of preserving family ‘honor,’ women and girls are shot, stoned, burned, buried alive, strangled, smothered and knifed to death with horrifying regularity.”

Women in the West have come a long way in some respects, but the labels “slut” and “whore” are still so shaming, and still evoke so much contempt, that even murder can seem justified to some. A woman who is stigmatized by these labels can be reduced to a status where she lacks access to the rights and protections accorded other citizens.

Serial rapists and murderers know this, and often prey upon prostitutes. Manny Fernandez highlights this fact in his April 7, 2011 *New York Times* article:

“In a courtroom in Seattle in 2003, Gary Ridgway, the so-called Green River Killer, who admitted to killing 48 women, seemed, when a prosecutor read his statement of guilt, to be speaking for all serial killers throughout the decades and centuries who have victimized prostitutes.

“I also picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed,” Mr. Ridgway said in his statement. “I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.”

I believe the taboos and prohibitions surrounding sex work are among the last vestiges of misogyny, and that feminism needs to grow a backbone and challenge the Whore/Madonna dichotomy. Perhaps in time it will. And then one day people will look back in dismay at the abysmal abridgement of human, civil and labor rights that have been inflicted on sex workers.

Sex workers have been persecuted, executed, exiled, imprisoned and enslaved. When will the world recognize that sex workers, like all workers, deserve to be treated with respect and accorded the full array of human rights? When any woman is vilified as a slut or whore, when any woman is considered to be “fallen,” all women are subject to the tyrannies of misogyny.

It may be awhile before we fully embrace the rights of sex workers, but it is imperative that we comprehend now how slut-shaming, whore-bashing and victim-blaming create an unsafe world for every woman and girl.

For instance, St. Joseph's University professor Raquel Bergen's research on violence against women has revealed that bystanders are less likely to come to the aid of a woman who is dressed in revealing clothing. And as anyone with access to the media knows, rape survivors are still routinely grilled about what they were wearing at the time of their rape.

How is it that as a society we still deem women who dress a certain way to be deserving of physical violence? In fact, as I consider where we are in 2013, I wonder how much progress really separates us from the old days when it was deemed legal and legitimate to rape or beat your wife as long as you didn't use a whip larger than your thumb.

You probably have not experienced honor killings or cyberbullying that leads to suicide in your own life. But what about less severe aspects of the sexual double standard? The fear of being labeled a "slut" or "whore" lives in every woman and shapes her life choices in ways she might be unaware of. Even a woman's freedom of movement can be curtailed if she is perceived as a "slut" or "whore." Don't think that happens in our modern society? Meet Clay Nikiforuk, who in 2013 was detained and interrogated three times in two weeks by U.S. border officials for carrying sexy lingerie and condoms in her luggage. It is telling that the man she was traveling with was neither detained nor interrogated.

Fortunately, there are signs that women the world over are rebelling against slut-shaming and whore-bashing. The Slut Walks which originated in Canada and spread as far away as India galvanized many women who took to the streets in unity, refusing to allow the label to silence or control them. Often wearing revealing clothing and carrying signs demanding "End Rape Culture Now," women protestors are defying the cultural assumptions which assert that women who are raped are to blame for their own rape.

Rush Limbaugh labeled attorney/activist Sandra Fluke as a slut and prostitute when she spoke in defense of women's reproductive rights in 2012. And some in the GOP asserted that Mitt Romney only lost to Obama due to something they labeled "the slut vote." But in response, Susan McMillan Emry founded the political movement known as "Rock the Slut Vote." She explained in an interview with *The Daily Caller*:

"It's clear they use words like 'slut' to try to shame women into staying quiet about issues involving reproductive rights and sex. Regrettably, from the legislation and the public remarks the GOP and their spokesmen make, they give the clear message that any woman who doesn't share their point of view is tainted as a slut. Our mission is to take all the power from the label 'slut' and defuse it with equal measures of humor and outrage."

But while there is a growing movement to reject slut-shaming, and to claim women's right to dignity regardless of what they wear or how many sexual partners they may have, the word "whore" remains a powerful force in the hands of those who would shame women into submission. I have watched many women grow silent with mortification when asked to remember the first time they were called a "whore." The word still communicates a strict warning that one's behavior as a female is approaching a point of no return, where the worst things may be visited upon her with little to no protection or recourse.

As a former sex worker, I have no illusions about the repercussions for being a woman who is out and proud of her sexual independence. I know firsthand how harsh the penalties can be. During the 15 years I worked as a high-end escort and proudly proclaimed the rights of prostitutes and all sex workers, I was arrested, evicted, audited and nearly lost visitation for my husband's children. As an activist I knew the risks I was incurring and I was willing to take them. Thankfully, my husband was a huge support to me during this often trying time. I don't know how I could have survived if he hadn't been willing to stand by me despite the fact that my activism often made his life difficult.

So I don't take it lightly when women choose to hide their sexual truth or otherwise "play nice" in order to accrue some of the benefits and protections which are accorded "good girls." But even if it is unwise to risk employment, housing, child custody or personal safety in a bid to further equal rights for women and to end the sexual double standard once and for all, we must as women come together behind the scenes and build the unity and unconditional acceptance we all so desperately need. We can no longer afford to label each other. We can no longer afford to buy into the Whore/Madonna dichotomy. We need each other regardless of our sexual behavior or our dress. And young women coming of age need our courage to pave a path which demands dignity and rights for women and girls no matter how they choose to express their sexual natures.

I was a guest on Bill Maher's television show, *Politically Incorrect*, in 1998. As such, I was the first out prostitute to appear on a comedy show. Until then, prostitutes were relegated to talk shows and the news. Being a guest alongside comedians such as Howie Mandel was heady stuff for me, and I knew it marked another stride toward ending sexual shame. On the show, Howie Mandel asked me if I was a "hooker" and I replied "Yes, but I prefer to be called a whore." Howie got the last laugh when he quipped "Well I'll just call you a slut!" But despite the raucous laughter that ensued, I knew in that moment that I was making an important statement against the fear which women worldwide feel in the face of these labels.

We don't have to fear the words "slut" and "whore." We can change the culture and demand respect no matter what we wear or who we have sex with. It is our right as humans. And it is high time.

Editors's Comments

Views expressed here are totally of Veronica Monet. Editorial board of Acta Medica International does not cut/edit/configure the invited editorials. Veronica is a highly visible spokesperson for sexual rights and has appeared on every major USA network as well as CNN, FOX, CNBC, WE, A&E and international television programs. She has been profiled in many publications including *The New York Times* and has lectured at a variety of academic venues including Kent State, Stanford and Yale Universities. She is the author of *Sex Secrets of Escorts* (Alpha Books 2005) and regularly contributes to a variety of publications. As a Certified Sexologist (ACS), Certified Sex Educator (SFSI) and Certified Anger Management Specialist (CAM) Veronica Monet coaches clients over the telephone and in-person at her Northern California office.

Suggested Readings

1. *Rock The Slut Vote Mobilizes for Liberals* in "The Daily Caller" by Caroline May, April 30, 2012
2. *SlutWalks and the Future of Feminism* in "The Washington Post" by Jessica Valenti, June 3, 2011
3. *I Was Detained and Interrogated at the Border for Carrying Condoms* in "The Huffington Post" by Clay Nikiforuk, April 19, 2013

4. *Issues in Intimate Violence* by Professor Raquel Kennedy Bergen, SAGE Publications, May 5, 1998
5. *Prostitutes' Disappearances Were Noticed Only When the First Bodies Were Found* in "The New York Times" by Manny Fernandez, April 7, 2014
6. *Impunity for Domestic Violence, "Honour Killings" Cannot Continue* UN Official in "UN News Centre," March 4, 2010
7. *Honour Killings Go Beyond Mere Homicide* in "The Huffington Post" by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, October 24, 2011
8. *Rehtaeh Parsons, Canadian Girl, Dies After Suicide Attempt; Parents Allege She Was Raped by 4 Boys* in "The Huffington Post," April 9, 2013
9. *Queens Girl, 12, Hangs Herself as It's Revealed School CyberBullies Called "Here a Slut and a Whore"* in "The Daily News" by Joseph Stepansky, Vera Chinese, Tom Tracy, Ben Chapman and Ginger Adams Otis, May 23, 2013
10. *Teens Who Admitted to Bullying Phoebe Prince Sentenced* in "Time NewsFeed" by Kayla Webley, May 5, 2011
11. *"Sexting" Bullying Cited in Teen's Suicide* in "Today News" by Michael Inbar, December 2, 2009

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