



*The Purity Myth*. Dir. Jeremy Earp.  
Perf. Jessica Valenti. Media Education  
Foundation, 2011. DVD.

### The Purity Myth: The Virginity Movement's War Against Women

This documentary is an adaptation of Jessica Valenti's 2009 bestselling book *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*. The documentary, which Valenti co-wrote the documentary with director Jeremy Earp, brings to life her argument by allowing the audience to see the pop-culture examples of the American media's problematical portrayal of women's sexuality.

The book and documentary both build upon Valenti's concept of the *purity myth*, which she defines as idea that women's societal value is based upon their sexuality. Valenti states in the documentary, "Women are still led to believe that our moral compass lies somewhere between our legs, literally". This concept that women's morality is tied to sexual purity is reinforced through traditions such as "purity balls" and often preached as a part of abstinence only sex education for youth. Yet young women also are inundated with social messages that place value on being found sexually desirable by men. These messages still promote an ideal of women's value being determined by their sexuality, just on the other extreme.

However, the push for purity is much stronger than just pop-culture; it is visible in more systematic ways. Valenti asserts that the rigid messages of sexual purity are part of a larger attack on women's reproductive health and societal role that is being spearheaded by the conservative movement. Recently this has come to the public forefront through the political attacks on organizations that provide women's reproductive health services and efforts to narrow the definition of rape. Valenti argues that the conservative agenda has taken on campaigns that create fear and shame around sexuality in an attempt to return women to more rigid and submissive gender roles.

In the documentary, Valenti explains that if we are truly invested in the well-being of girls and women, then we must challenge the notions that women's sexual activity defines who they are and their value in society. Instead, we must promote messages that women's sense of self-worth should be derived from qualities sexuality such as intelligence, compassion, and kindness. This message aligns very well with the work we are doing in sexual violence prevention. We know some of the factors that contribute to rape culture include limited roles for women, rigid gender stereotypes, and patriarchal norms around sexuality. Therefore it is critical we provide our communities with opportunities to critically examine and question the pop-culture messages we consume about women's sexuality.

#### Suggested uses:

- This documentary can be used as a visual tool to when having discussions around gender roles and healthy sexuality.
- There are many current pop-culture icons and clips from new media presented, so this may also work well with media literacy activities. Participants could watch the film and then discuss how to promote examples of positive sexuality.
- The political argument made in the documentary may be a good start to a deeper conversation around representation of women in politics, the separation of values from public health, and to examine how policies impact our lives.