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Politics and Misogyny

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With Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's win in New Hampshire, gender issues are suddenly in the news. Where has everybody been?

If there was ever a story that deserved more coverage by the news media, it's the dark persistence of misogyny in America. Sexism in its myriad destructive forms permeates nearly every aspect of American life. For many men, it's the true national pastime, much bigger than baseball or football.

Little attention is being paid to the toll that misogyny takes on society in general, and women and girls in particular.

Its forms are limitless. Hard-core pornography is a multibillion-dollar business, having spread far beyond the stereotyped raincoat crowd to anyone with a laptop and a password. Crowds of crazed photographers risk life and limb to get shots of Paris Hilton or Britney Spears without their underwear. At New York Jets home games, men regularly gather at Gate D to urge female fans to expose themselves.

In its grimmest aspects, misogyny manifests itself in hideous violence — from brutal beatings and rape to outright torture and murder. Fifteen months ago, a gunman invaded an Amish schoolhouse in rural Pennsylvania, separated the girls from the boys, and then shot 10 of the girls, killing five.

The cable news channels revel in stories about women (almost always young and attractive) who come to a gruesome end at the hands of violent men. The stories seldom, if ever, raise the issue of misogyny, which permeates not just the crimes themselves, but the coverage as well.

The latest of these obsessively covered stories concerned a pregnant marine, Maria Frances Lauterbach, who had complained to authorities that she had been raped by a fellow marine. Her body was found last week buried in a backyard fire pit in North Carolina.

It just so happens that the Democratic presidential candidates are campaigning this week in the misogyny capital of America: Nevada. It's a perfect place to bring up the way women are viewed and treated in this society, but don't hold your breath. Presidential wannabes are hardly in the habit of insulting the locals.

Prostitution is legal in much of Nevada and heavily promoted even where it's not. In Las Vegas, where prostitution is illegal but flourishes nevertheless, Mayor Oscar Goodman has said that creating a series of legal, "magnificent" brothels would be a great development tool for his city.

The fundamental problem in all of this is that women and girls are dehumanized, opening the floodgates to every kind of mistreatment. "Once you dehumanize somebody, everything else is possible," said Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of the women's advocacy group Equality Now.

A grotesque exercise in the dehumanization of women is carried out routinely at Sheri's Ranch, a legal brothel about an hour's ride outside of Vegas. There the women have to respond like Pavlov's dog to an electronic bell that might ring at any hour of the day or night. At the sound of the bell, the prostitutes have five minutes to get to an assembly area where they line up, virtually naked, and submit to a humiliating inspection by any prospective customer who has happened to drop by.

If you don't think this is an issue worthy of a presidential campaign, consider the scandalous way that women are treated in the military and the fact that the winner of this election will become the commander in chief.

The sexual mistreatment of women in the military is widespread. The Defense Department financed a study in 2003 of female veterans seeking health assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Nearly a third of those surveyed said they had been the victim of a rape or attempted rape during their service.

The Associated Press reported in 2006 that more than 80 military recruiters had been disciplined over the course of a year because of sexual misconduct with young women and girls who had considered joining the military.

There continue to be widespread complaints from women about rape and other forms of sexual attacks in the military, and about a culture that tends to protect the attackers.

To what extent are the candidates of either party concerned about these matters? Do they have any sense of how extensive and debilitating the mistreatment of women and girls really is?

We've become so used to the disrespectful, degrading, contemptuous and even violent treatment of women that we hardly notice it. Staggering amounts of violence are unleashed against women and girls every day. Fashionable ads in mainstream publications play off of that violence, exploiting themes of death and dismemberment, female submissiveness and child pornography.

If we've opened the door to the issue of sexism in the presidential campaign, then let's have at it. It's a big and important issue that deserves much more than lip service.

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