

For Women Only

Shaunti Feldhan

I read this book MANY times in my early 20's—there were so many requirements placed on individuals growing up as/socialized as women to both understand and cater to men. I thought this book was different because it was “research”—it gave facts and numbers...surely it had to be accurate, right? As a researcher myself I see that this book is definitely NOT research (surveys don't count as research) and there are many problematic issues. Of course the “data” is going to say what it says when she was trying to make it say a certain thing. While the author's intent is not to disrespect men or paint them as primitive clods, she kinda does just that. The impression of men from this book is that they are fragile, unable to control themselves, in need of being catered to, cannot see beyond physical/external appearance, and of course NEED sex in order to feel like a real man. While there are some points in the book that seem fair and agreeable, it is hidden beneath not only this poor perception of men but also suggestions on every page for women to make incredible efforts to prioritize and satisfy the man in their life even if its at the expense of themselves, which it usually is.

A couple quick notes before we begin:

- There have been many editions of this book; I read the original version, published in the year 2000. The page numbers listed below are reflected of this first edition; if you have a different edition, the page numbers may be different.
- After this book came out, the author, Shaunti Feldhan, elicited the help of her husband, Jeff, to write a book “For Men Only” that detailed the inner lives and struggles of women. I did read that back in the day and have a copy on order currently. I may review it, haven't decided yet. It's important to know this though because while purity culture seems to have had the majority of the impact on women, men faced a lot of misinformation, manipulation, shame and dangerous teaching as well.
- As usual, some of what I am about to share may feel incredibly triggering, angering, upsetting, or shocking. The goal in doing these purity culture book reviews is to shed light on what has been taught in the purity culture and the damage that it can cause, even after walking away. Please use the caution you need in reading this review

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There is a theme that is rampant in this book about the responsibility of the woman to ensure that a man is not feeling disrespected, angry, less than, etc. In any case where “your man” is less than happy and engaged, it is assumed that you, as the woman have done something to create this situation and it is therefore you that is responsible to ensure that it is resolved. Of course I am not suggesting that we should be unnecessarily cruel or disrespectful to people or that we should not take responsibility for ourselves and the way we communicate. However, this passage here and

in the rest of the book is not suggesting personal responsibility and human decency. Instead it places the weight of responsibility on the woman to ensure that the man is ok WITHOUT him needing to take responsibility for his emotions or actions.

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Here we see that we are to respect his judgement on all things—essentially, questioning a man is something that will cause him to feel humiliated and disrespected. Women are painted in a light that they try to control everything (this is stated several times throughout the book) including and especially her husband. Later on in the book she uses the age-old example of men refusing to stop and ask for directions, suggesting that a woman telling him he needs to stop and ask OR EVEN ASKING HIM IF HE KNOWS WHERE HE IS GOING is an act of such disrespect and humiliation that we should not be surprised if the man retaliates with anger, the silent treatment or other meanness. In the author's words it is much more desirable to be late to the place you are going than to have your husband feeling badly about himself because you asked him to stop for directions (and thereby indicating that you don't trust him to know what he is doing).

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“The little things equal one big clue” In addition to the previous slide, questioning a man's judgment or choices is tantamount to not trusting him. The antidote to that is the we are to FORCE ourselves to trust our men. We are to trust him because he is a man, simple as that. No attention is given to anecdotal and empirical research that indicates trust is built in small, consistent actions and has a lot of components to it—none of which include force or fear.

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In a continued effort to show that “it is a man's world” and women are supposed to both go along with it as well as abdicating her own Self, we see that our communication must not only take him into consideration but that communication must be filtered through how we think that HE would hear it. Essentially, if we do not communicate in the perfect way for our male-partner to hear, then we are at fault for his response to it. Again, I am not suggesting that in a partnered relationship, friendship, family, work situation, etc., that we shouldn't pay attention to our communication and/or to communicate with kindness, compassion, and decency. It's the repeated message that if the man doesn't understand what the woman is saying it MUST ALWAYS be the woman's fault AND the man, essentially, has permission to do/act/think/feel however he wants to as a result.

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The author paints men as having a fragile ego—a VERY fragile ego (which goes along with her “research” and subsequent interpretations that a man should not be questioned lest he feel humiliated and disrespected). Here, however, it is taken a step further. What happens when a man is not feeling validated or his ego is bruised (which is subjective)? Not only will he seek

affirmation elsewhere, but that is to be expected and we should not be shocked when that happens.

One tangible way this plays out in purity culture is when a husband has an affair with a woman who is not his wife. Though there are loose recognitions that the husband needs to repent of his sins and seek to make amends, the focus very quickly shifts to the wife, asking the question “what did YOU do to cause him to need to step out of the relationship?” The wife is blamed for a myriad of things that paint her as a character who was so cantankerous to live with that the husband seemingly had no choice. While it is true that when someone has an affair there are many reasons it happens, including relational issues that may or may not involve the other partner, the person who had the affair is 100% responsible for doing what they did. They had a choice and made it. Regardless of how their partner acted, there were other choices available to them. Purity culture (and most fundamentalism) teaches that the woman is always at least partially to blame for the man’s sin (whether that is an affair, lust, etc.)

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Here we see a bit more of a demonstration of what I pointed out on the previous slide—if a man’s ego is not prioritized, he will seek affirmation elsewhere: other partners, pornography, work, financial success, etc. As the passage states: “My wife may be nagging me at home, the kids may be disobedient, and I may be worried about messing up at work, but looking at the woman in that picture makes me feel like a man!” This is the line of thought that leads so many Christian women to believe that if their husband cheats it’s at least partially their fault for not being the kind of wife he would like to come home to.

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This is part of the chapter that suggests that a man not only feels a burden to financially provide for his family (all the time) but also suggests that “research” indicates that if a man is not the financial breadwinner in the marriage there will be contention, resentment and a bruised ego. Interestingly, this is painted as both a noble responsibility and a burden—but it’s ever changing in terms of which one it actually is. The chapter goes on to make many suggestions about how a wife can alleviate this and what her responsibility is to ensure that he feels like he is the provider. Again, this is not suggesting that it’s not ok for a man to want to provide or work hard or that there is something wrong if as a couple you decide to have someone stay home with the kids. It goes back to the ways this requires a woman to diminish herself in favor of ensuring that her husband feels ok.

I remember hearing this message, in various forms, from so many angles...truly it was the foundation for what made me believe that I SHOULD’N’T go to college and pursue an education and career. I figured I would be staying at home with children anyways and I knew that if I was educated or had a job, I may become intimidating to a man (including my husband). I believed that I couldn’t have a career that I love and subconsciously kept myself from moving up within various career fields and companies because I didn’t want to seem like a feminist (which is one of the worst things a purity culture woman could be called...that and a Jezebel)

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The next few slides are from the chapter detailing the absolute ESSENTIALNESS of sex for a man. First we see that the NEED for sex is compared to the NEED for sleep. Not only is this an incredibly inaccurate statement (we may not want to live without sex but it is not essential in the way sleep is) but it also begins to create the narrative that because men need sex, as a woman, I need to give it to him. There are other implications to this (“if I don’t sleep with him, he will go out and find someone who will and that will be my fault for withholding) and also begins to lay the foundation that sex is expected in a relationship, that a woman is obligated to give it to her husband, and that consent isn’t necessary.

Also, we know that within purity culture sex before marriage is strictly prohibited. Yet we see that in order for a man to feel successful, meaningful and like he is making a difference in the world, he NEEDS sex. Again, this is wildly inaccurate but also why do we not consider then how on earth non-married men would ever even survive if they have this need that cannot be met until they are married but also is a determining factor in regard to if they are successful in the world?

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Here we see the responsibility being shifted back to the woman again, both to understand this deep need for sex as well as to meet that need. There is no discussion of consent, mutuality, equality, etc. It’s highly manipulative to suggest that if a woman could simply understand a man’s need then she would WANT to fulfill it. That is incredibly dangerous and can create a lot of shame for a woman who doesn’t desire to have sex with her partner (for whatever reason) and suggests that she needs to get over that—or in some cases, as some pastors would preach (*cough* Mark Driscoll *cough*) if a woman isn’t given her husband sex she is actively sinning, needs to repent and give him a bj (yes, he actually did say that in a sermon...google it)

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So perhaps you have mustered up the courage to say “no” to sex with your husband...it doesn’t stop there. Not only is consent not taught and sex expected between a woman and a man in marriage, if a woman is able to utter out a “no”, she is then responsible for ensuring the emotional well being of her husband—to ensure he doesn’t feel rejected or not like a man. These are statements from men who the author interviewed and we can see plainly that a woman’s decline of the request for sex is equatable to rejection of the person. And while I know this is something that happens outside of purity culture as well (hello, r*pe culture!) to suggest that a woman must deny her own voice and body autonomy to ensure that a man feels ok about himself is wrong on every level.

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I’m gonna just let you soak in these suggestions...talk about the emotional labor a woman is required to do in order to try and seek bodily autonomy and being able to voice what she is ok with doing! There is zero mention, at any point in this book, that a man is responsible for the

way he feels, that his desires or what he expects from his wife is unreasonable or that it is abnormal to assume she is not responsible for meeting his every need.

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“You’re cluttering up a good husband’s mind and tempting him to dishonor his wife”...this is the only real mention we get of anything modesty related. This chapter of discusses that men have a “visual rolodex” of images that can pop up at any time that can distract a man from their task at hand. The responsibility on women then is to ensure that you are not dressing or acting in a way that would leave an imprint on his mind that he could “call up” at any point and then dishonor his wife.

This is extremely harmful ideology and something I spent a great deal of time feeling immense anxiety and terror about...this idea that the way I dress on a given day could be used as a man to sexually pleasure himself, even when I was trying to be modest. It felt like there was no escaping the dangerous male mind AND my responsibility to ensure that to the best of my ability I was not adding pictures of me to this visual rolodex. Practically speaking this meant I covered myself up more and more: baggier clothes, tons of layers, wearing men’s clothes, hiding myself with excess weight, remaining quiet at all times. All in an effort to help my “brothers in christ” not lust after me in the moment or in any other random moment in his imagination.

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An entire chapter of the book discusses how visual men are—that they are allured, tempted, and lust after women at any chance they get. Though the author doesn’t really talk much about modesty culture and watching the way you dress, she talks about it from the man’s perspective in the sense that their eyes are roaming at a minimum of all the time and can hardly keep their d*ck from getting hard all the time. Not only is her representation of men in this chapter fairly barbaric and animalistic, she goes “off script” for a bit and instead of blaming women or admonishing women to make sure their husband is feeling ok, she says that we, as women, are not to take this personally. If your husband is drooling over another person and you are insecure, you probably need to get over it because that’s just how men are created. So there is some responsibility for women here: don’t make a big deal over the way men were created. Just get used to it.

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Ahhhh, romance. An entire chapter devoted to how men want to be romantic but don’t know how because they psyche themselves out and become resentful if you don’t pay their romantic gestures back with sex. I am not against the correlation between romance and sex...certainly that can be an enjoyable and intimate connection. What I am against, however, is this idea that a man deserves a reward (reward in the form of sex) for planning something romantic AND that it’s totally normal for him to be upset if he doesn’t get sex after he’s planned a romantic evening. There is nothing wrong with having desires and fantasies about how something should go. But to

plan something with the express purpose of another person HAVING to do the thing you want them to do is inauthentic and quite frankly, manipulative and coercive.

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I admit, this was the most difficult chapter for me to read, I sobbed multiple times trying to get through it as I felt, intensely, what my younger self was feeling, the fear, the shame, the terror, the guilt. This chapter is incredibly fatphobic (among many other things) and truly equates beauty to a specific body size (though the body size is both not specifically identified nor does this chapter recognize that beauty is subjective and people have tons of preferences in regard to body shape, size, features, etc.) The main gist of this chapter is: "...you need to look good for me...and if you don't, that's going to both upset me, make me feel uncared for and ultimately give me permission to hurt you (e.g. have an affair) because clearly you don't care about me"

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Here we start to see these messages fleshed out even more: "When you don't take care of yourself, I feel unvalued and unhappy". Let me make a disclaimer here first: I do believe that it is normal for partners to care about each other's health—this usually stems from a deep love of the other person as well as loving their relationship and desiring for it to last for a while. If your partner has, for instance, a heart condition, it can be very normal for you to care about different activities (including food consumption) to ensure the partner's health as well as being able to live a full life. That is NOT what this book is talking about. There is a difference between wanting a partner to take care of themselves so that they are living a full and healthy life with you and wanting a partner to take care of themselves (read actually: lose weight) so that they can meet a specific beauty standard of your preference so that it helps you stay attracted and not cheat on them.

Again, this is what purity culture teaches: a woman needs to be satisfying to her husband, including in the way she looks.

The other problem with this is that there is no attention given to, in these examples in the book, why a woman would gain weight...no consideration is given to things like: hormones, being incredibly busy, trauma, emotional issues or it just being f*cking ok to not have to have a body size that aims at pleasing others. But purity culture doesn't teach this. It teaches a specific way of looking in an effort to please a man—and let us not forget that pleasing a man and keeping his attention means it's less likely he will cheat!

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And here we see it nice and clear: "I'm a visual creature, it takes so much restraint to not look at another woman...so if you're fat or not taking care of yourself, it makes it really hard for me to not lust after others." I stand by my comment in the book: Oh. Hell. No. The notion that "I can only be faithful to you if you are attractive to me according to my standards" is deeply manipulative and is the absence of autonomy.

Quick note: I am not suggesting that it's "bad" to be physically attracted to your partner...I would say it's essential to be physically attracted. What I am also saying is that its ok to have physical attraction preferences and it's also necessary that we look at other aspects of a person's life AND we cannot require our partner to look a certain way or be a certain size while holding the punishment of you cheating over their head. "Look this way or I will cheat" is a dynamic of power and control. It's a big no.

Last slide

Here is one of the few places this purity culture book brings god into the mix: and of course it's in the chapter on attraction and body size. It's the idea that if you truly want to please your husband and meet his physical attraction desires and demands, god will not only help you but god will make those things happen as a way of honoring the marriage. This is very manipulative territory.

Ok, so there we have it! This purity culture book definitely deviates from other purity culture books in that there isn't as much of the theological push underlying it covertly or overtly. Initially that was the appeal to me...not because I was trying to get away from the theological foundations of purity culture, but I thought that this book was scientific and therefore PROVED that purity culture was not only the right way according to the bible but according to science. Whew, I was wrong! What was obviously underlying the book and was very apparent throughout was the foundation of patriarchy which is very much a foundational tenant of purity culture. Every chapter reiterated that women needed to make it a goal, in a variety of ways, to ensure that regardless of the cost to her, her husband was happy. These are GROOMING tactics for abusive and toxic relationships.