

A Woman's Worth

by **Jessie Palatucci**
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“Smile. It makes you look prettier.” This piece of advice came unprompted, courtesy of a perfect stranger as I walked down the street. Has this ever happened to you? I’ve done some asking around and discovered that most of the young women I know have received similar, unsolicited advice.

I like to think of this odd cultural habit as the tip of the gender-bias iceberg. It may seem like nothing, but it’s a symptom of something bigger. It illuminates a power dynamic in which men feel that they have the right and authority to evaluate and instruct women. It also serves to reinforce a narrative told to girls for generations – that your beauty is your most valuable asset. It’s great to be smart, generous, clever, and hard working. But it’s best to be pretty.

This is small stuff in a world where women are sold into slavery. It’s barely worth noting in a time when schoolgirls are kidnapped and used as tools of war. It feels decedent to complain about such a thing when one out of every three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual abuse during their lifetime.

And yet, it serves as an important reminder. Our conversational and social habits help to normalize more extreme and harmful behaviors. Though we have advanced in our work for equality, we still live in a world which men and women experience differently, and those differences are not benign. The fact that women and girls face discrimination based on their gender puts them at increased risk of a number of social ills including poverty, violence, ill health and a poor education.

This is obviously bad news for women, but really it’s terrible news for all of us. Research has shown that empowering and educating women is one of the most effective ways to [reduce poverty](#), improve public health, [enhance economic productivity](#), and promote peace.

We’re quick to point the finger at cultures and religions in faraway lands that

we see as oppressive to women, but we're slow to turn the mirror on ourselves. Here at home more than [1 in 3 women](#) experience rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. It is estimated that [100,000 children in the United States](#) are trafficked into the sex trade each year.

The changes needed to correct this imbalance are big and small. We need to throw our support behind public policies that advance the cause of women everywhere. One example, the International Violence Against Women Act, was recently introduced in the Senate. I-VAWA makes ending violence against women a top diplomatic and foreign assistance priority. It will streamline and better synchronize programming across various U.S. government agencies, making addressing gender-based violence a cornerstone of our development and foreign policy. It seems like a no-brainer, but now is an important time to [remind your legislators](#) that this is “must pass” legislation.

In our personal lives we can make some small but important changes too. We can really think about how we talk to and about women. Instead of telling little girls that they are pretty, why not try asking them about their favorite books and interests? Rather than attacking female leaders for their appearance, how about taking on their ideas?

And let's stop telling strange women how they should look. They don't owe you a smile (or anything else). And I bet your momma (another great woman, no doubt) taught you better than that.

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