



Making women's issues go away

A damning new report reveals that the Bush administration has quietly removed 25 reports from its Women's Bureau Web site, deleting or distorting crucial information on issues from pay equity to reproductive healthcare.

By Rebecca Traister

April 28, 2004 | If you'd logged onto the Department of Labor's [Women's Bureau](#) Web site in 1999, you would have found a list of more than 25 fact sheets and statistical reports on topics ranging from "Earning Differences Between Men and Women" to "Facts About Asian American and Pacific Islander Women" to "Women's Earnings as Percent of Men's 1979-1997."

Not anymore. Those fact sheets no longer exist on the Women's Bureau Web site, and have instead been replaced with a handful of peppier titles, like "Hot Jobs for the 21st Century" and "20 Leading Occupations for Women." It's just one example of the ways in which the Bush administration is dismantling or distorting information on women's issues, from pay equity to reproductive healthcare, according to "Missing: Information About Women's Lives," a new report released Wednesday by the [National Council for Research on Women](#).

You've probably heard about some of the other examples in "Missing" -- for instance, the time the [Centers for Disease Control](#) removed an online guide to condom use and changed the fact-sheet language to indicate that studies on condom use were inconclusive, focusing instead on abstinence. But the power of "Missing" comes not from its dozens of individual examples, but from the depth and breadth of its findings about the small ways in which the Bush administration is draining the well of dependable public scientific and sociological information.

"When these instances are taken individually, perhaps we don't see the cumulative pattern of what's happening," said Linda Basch, president of the 23-year-old NCRW, an alliance of 100 women's policy, research and education centers, including the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, Planned Parenthood, and the Girl Scouts. "But when we gather the information together, and see the distorted or disappearing information about the economic opportunities, the situation of violence against women, health and particularly reproductive health, it is a very distressing pattern."

Released just three days after an estimated 1 million people gathered in Washington for the [March for Women's Lives](#), "Missing" exhaustively catalogs the ways in which government information about women's health, labor and education has been altered, removed or obfuscated during the Bush administration. "This is really undermining a nonpartisan legacy of government," said Basch, referring to a history of reliable dissemination of scientific data by the federal government. Of concern to NCRW researchers is the possibility that this morphed or absent information will hurt future researchers, policymakers and citizens who in the past would have relied on federal sources of information in their advocacy for women's equity and access.

In an e-mailed statement to Salon, New York Rep. Carolyn Maloney said, "I'm grateful to the National Council for Research on Women for confirming what many of us in Congress have insisted for years -- we can't continue to advance as women if the cold, hard facts of our status are unknown. We've seen a disturbing trend toward hiding the information that helps us improve women's lives. I hope that this is the beginning of a successful effort to uncover the missing data."

California Rep. Barbara Lee also sent a statement, saying, "This report outlines a disturbing pattern of decisions by federal agencies to close down, delay, alter, or spin data about what is happening to American women and girls. Science must not be sacrificed and silenced like this. We must take every opportunity to point out the Administration's attempts to twist, distort, and subvert science to advance its right-wing based political agenda."

Many of the shifts in federal agency information have been reported in the past, but, when seen together, look even more impressive -- or horrifying. Some individual examples -- like the observations about the DOL's Women's Bureau -- will look new. The report notes that in 1999, the Women's Bureau mission statement, printed on its Web site, described its responsibilities "to advocate and inform women directly and the public as well, of women's rights and employment issues" and "to ensure that the voices of working women are heard, and their priorities represented in the public policy arena." Back then, the Women's Bureau claimed that it "Alerts women about their rights in the workplace, proposes policies and legislation that benefit working women, researches and analyzes information about women and work, [and] makes appropriate reports on its findings." The NCRW researchers noticed that by February 2002, the Bureau's mission statement looked very different. Its asserted goal was "To promote profitable employment opportunities for women, to empower them by enhancing their skills and improving their working conditions, and to provide employers with more alternatives to meet their labor needs." The 2002 "Vision Statement" reads: "We will empower women to enhance their potential for securing more satisfying employment as they seek to balance their work-life needs." In other words: less information about helpful policy and legislation, more potential-enhancing tips on balancing "work" and "life."

Then there are the missing fact sheets, and the popular handbook on the rights of women in the workplace, called "Don't Work in the Dark -- Know Your Rights," that's not to be found. The "1993 Handbook on Women Workers," which was available in 1999, is no longer. Though it is scheduled for rerelease sometime in the future, NCRW researchers who contacted the Women's Bureau learned that no publication date is set.

Irasema Garza, the director of the women's rights department for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, and the former director of the Women's Bureau from 1999-2000, had seen parts of the "Missing" report that pertained to her former department. "As soon as I saw the report, I went to my old Web site and found that the majority of all of our fact sheets were gone," she said. "In my old job, I traveled all around the country giving speeches -- but all the women wanted were these fact sheets. Women really used this information to protect themselves in the workplace."

Contacted by Salon for a response to the report, a spokeswoman for the Department of Labor said that the Women's Bureau director was traveling, but e-mailed a response to the queries about the changing mission statement and publication list. That e-mail said, in part, "Congress created the Women's Bureau in 1920 to 'formulate standards and policies which shall promote the welfare of wage-earning women,

improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment.' Under that mandate, the Women's Bureau's focus, programs, publications and website are changed and updated periodically to reflect the priorities of the current Administration, the Secretary of Labor and the Director of the Women's Bureau. The Bureau continues to work with internal and external partners and stakeholders to develop programs to address the needs of 21st Century working women." The White House press office, contacted for comment, did not respond by press time.

"The fact that 25 reports on issues of equality and access have been removed from this website is enormously distressing," said Basch of the findings about the changes at the Women's Bureau. She pointed out that the public, as well as researchers, journalists and policymakers, turns to agency Web sites for information about rights and government policies. Basch claimed that last year there were over 250 million hits to government Web sites.

Those 250 million hits will have also turned up some changes in language at the Census Bureau, which reported on its Web site's "Facts for Features" page for 2003 Women's History Month that the earnings gap between women and men -- about 76 female cents to every male dollar -- means that women's salary are "at an all-time high." That's a considerably more cheerful outlook than the 2000 Census Bureau posting about an earnings gap figure that was only about 1 percent different than 2003's. According to "Missing," in 2000 the Web site told visitors that "Women have almost achieved parity in educational attainment ... but not earnings equality," and that "Men working fulltime, year round, consistently earned more than comparable women in each of the educational levels." According to researchers, the newer, more positive spin on issues like earnings figures is dangerous because it diminishes the notion that there are massive strides to be made before earnings parity is possible. "Basically, the administration seems to have the assumption that there is a level playing field and that paying attention to a particular subgroup is divisive," said Martha Farnsworth Riche, a demographer in private practice and the Bill Clinton-appointed director of the Census Bureau from 1994-98. Basch noted the effect that changing information and modified spin could have on the future of advocacy for women. "When the information doesn't exist, when no one is there watching out for the interests of certain categories of populations, it's bad," she said. "There are still far too many gender-based inequalities for us to take our eyes off of what is happening to women."

Census Bureau Public Affairs specialist Robert Bernstein was unable to find the language quoted by "Missing" in the 2000 "Facts for Features" edition, though the page contains a link to a press release that is no longer available. Bernstein, who has been with the Census Bureau for 14 years, said that he doesn't believe there is any new spin on earnings information. "What we try to do is present data in a positive light about different groups. It was a fact that that ratio at the time did represent an all-time high." Bernstein also noted that the "all-time high" language would have come straight from the news release about the Bureau's annual Income and Poverty Report. And though he doesn't think that there's been a noticeable upturn in the language of the Bureau, Bernstein did confirm one of the fears of the NCRW. "The point of 'Facts

for Features' is to give information to reporters, allowing them to do a particular feature story [pegged to] a particular holiday or observance," said Bernstein. "They're trying to do upbeat stories."

When it comes to issues of women's health, agencies like the CDC, FDA and the Health and Human Services Administration don't fare much better than the DOL or the Census Bureau with the NCRW researchers. One of their chief battle cries -- and arguments about why a study like "Missing" can be valuable in the future -- is over the changed language on a National Cancer Institute Web site. "Missing" cites the case of the 1997 New England Journal of Medicine study that conclusively proved that there was no link between breast cancer and abortion, a favorite claim of anti-abortion advocates. The NCI had a fact sheet with reference to the study posted on its Web site until November 2002, when the Web site was changed to indicate that studies about the link had been "inconclusive," an assertion that lent implied credence to the claims of the anti-abortion advocates. According to "Missing," members of Congress forced the convening of a panel of experts who reinforced the New England Journal's findings, and the NCI again posted information that there is no link between breast cancer and abortion.

Over at the Centers for Disease Control, the NCRW researchers claim, posted fact sheets were revised to suggest studies on the effectiveness of using condoms to prevent the spread of HIV and other STDs were "inconclusive." Instead, the revised fact sheet focused on abstinence -- a favorite of the family values crowd -- as the only effective path to sexual health. As was reported at the time, the CDC also removed an online guide to proper condom use (replacing it later with a revised edition) as well as a list of successful sex education programs and studies that showed no rise in sexual activity among teens taught about condoms. "These are debates that scientific research has closed," said Riche. "The people who provide the information are now reopening those debates, taking away the scientific certainty. It's more subtle than putting out wrong information or simply removing all the information -- and, frankly, more effective."

According to the researchers behind "Missing," the pressure of right-wing ideology has also led scientists to stop using words like "gay," "sex worker," and "transgender" in their grant applications. This comes in the wake of the Traditional Values Coalition's very long and damning list of 150 researchers and 200 grants in the field of high-risk sexual behavior. Then there's the case of the morning-after pill, which has yet to appear as an over-the-counter medication, despite the two scientific advisory committees that urged the FDA to make it one. According to "Missing," it was pressure from conservative groups that led FDA commissioner Mark McClellan to postpone his expected February 2004 decision on the matter by 90 days.

"Missing" doesn't concern itself only with absent online information. It also lists some of the actual governmental bodies that have disappeared or been threatened during the Bush administration. In 2001, George Bush disbanded the President's Interagency Council on Women, a group appointed in 1995 by Bill Clinton to implement strategies developed at the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, as part of the U.N. Platform for Action. The council was chaired by Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala and then by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. "One of the things the office did was make sure the president's policies reflected women's issues," said Garza. "That office is gone. It was one of the first things that was done away with under this administration."

Reversals are possible. When the Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality changed the wording in a mandated report on the disparities in healthcare along racial and socioeconomic lines, suggesting that "disparities" in the diagnosing and treatment of HIV, diabetes and hypertension among women of color were actually "differences," people noticed and complained. A spin like that could be very detrimental to attitudes and eventual action on behalf of women of color who are at a disadvantage. The document was restored to its original wording in February. "Missing" cites this example, and hopes that by getting people to pay attention to so many others, information will be restored.

"In my experience, I would say we are probably just seeing the tip of the iceberg with this report," said Riche. "If we know about all these examples, that means there are many, many more." To that end, the NCRW is establishing a Misinformation Clearinghouse Web site through which people can submit examples of information that is no longer available to them. The Clearinghouse will also collect and publish a list of sources for dependable information.