

WEBSITE REVIEW

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE NEW WHITE HOUSE COUNCIL ON WOMEN & GIRLS RE: FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WEBSITES FOR WOMEN

by Beth Harper

To the White House Council on Women & Girls:

First, welcome to the world! We're glad you're here! What a great way for President Obama to celebrate Women's History Month, signing Executive Order 13506 on March 11, 2009, to create a council to "work across executive departments and agencies to provide a coordinated Federal response to issues that have a distinct impact on the lives of women and girls."¹

I realize you've got plenty on your plate, but that's not going to stop me from giving you a little friendly advice. I'm a reference librarian — that's what I do! I'm also a government documents specialist, so I spend a lot of time helping people find government information. It's from this perspective that I'm writing you.

My first piece of advice: Oppose suggestions to do away with Women's History Month! Women certainly have come a long way in our society, and some people feel we don't need a special month to focus on women and their achievements. Of course, the Executive Order creating the Council states some of the inequalities that still exist between the sexes. Those inequalities are reason enough to keep celebrating Women's History Month. From a more pragmatic perspective, I can say that after looking at dozens of federal agency websites, it's Women's History Month that has prompted the creation of much female-centered content on federal webpages! Take, for example, the Library of Congress, which has tons of material about women in its print and digital collections, and is the type of institution that loves to create guides on finding information on all kinds of topics. The most comprehensive, prominent, and current Library of Congress guide to materials on women is its page on **Women's History Month** (<http://womenshistorymonth.gov/index.html>). It is a great guide, with links to fascinating exhibits on women in World War II and on quilts and quilting in the U.S.; and to collections such as

photos from the campaign for women's suffrage and videos and motion pictures of dancer Katherine Dunham. This page also links to other, more specialized Library of Congress resource guides, such as **African American Women in the Sciences and Related Disciplines** (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/tracer-bullets/africanwomentb.html>) and **Women's History Resources in the Prints & Photographs Division: Picture Pathfinder** (http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/237_path.html). I'm delighted that these pages exist, but confused by their labels. The resources to which these guides point are available year-round; I wonder why they're grouped under a "Women's History Month" label, rather than just "Women"?

Second, I recommend establishing "women" as an audience category on the **USA.gov** website (<http://www.usa.gov/>), the general citizen electronic gateway to federal government websites. Specific audiences listed on the "Audiences" page (<http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Audiences.shtml>) include "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," "Teens,"



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“Homeowners,” and even “Outdoor Enthusiasts,” but not “Women.” And trust me, citizens would benefit from a collection of links to women-related government sites. It was hard enough for me to find these sites, and finding information is what I do for a living! I can’t imagine approaching this as an everyday citizen. Again, an example: in reviewing federal websites for women, I looked at women’s health sites from the National Institutes for Health, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Health and Human Services Department’s Office of Women’s Health. I also looked through the list of agencies and commissions found in the *U.S. Government Manual*, a reference resource that describes all the major federal agencies and commissions, searching for agencies and bureaus that deal specifically with women’s issues. After doing all this research, how did I discover that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had an Office of Women’s Health (<http://www.fda.gov/womens/default.htm>)? By looking at the “Additional Links” section of the Social Security Administration’s *Social Security Information for Women* page (of course!).

I know that one of the first tasks of the Council is to ask each agency to assess its current programs and activities in terms of how they affect women. One method you might consider using is looking at each agency’s and commission’s website. Websites, especially government ones, often end up reflecting the organization of an office or bureau, so a website can give some indication of the importance a bureau places on issues affecting women. Also, in many cases a federal agency’s or commission’s website is its public face — many people interact with the government primarily via the Web. A given bureau or office may be trying to do great things to help women, but people can’t benefit from those efforts unless they’re aware of them and understand them.

I want to share some observations I’ve made in surveying federal government sites about or for women, to give you a taste of what’s out there, in terms of topics covered and the quality of those sites. I’ll point out some of the strengths and weaknesses of sites and try to tease out some broader lessons. I can only focus on a few sites, so I’ll discuss sites that relate to two of the four main areas the Council will focus on in the coming year: economic security for women and improving women’s health care.²

Unless noted, the sites reviewed below provide at least some, if not all, of their website content in Spanish as well as in English — yay! Also, unless so noted, they do *not* supply information about webpage accessibility on their main sites — boo.

Economic security for women is addressed by many agencies, from the Department of Labor to the Small Business Administration and the National Business Women’s Council (whose site <http://www.nwbc.gov> is a hidden gem, although without Spanish-language text). I’ll start with the **Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor** (<http://www.dol.gov/wb/>); no Spanish-language options), as it’s the oldest surviving federal government bureau dedicated to women’s issues. It was created 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.”³ Given that mission, the Bureau’s Internet presence is smaller than I’d expect. The main page links to some useful statistical reports on women in the workforce, an updated calendar of events around the country related to women and work, and descriptions of initiatives the Bureau has funded. The most exciting project linked from the Women’s Bureau’s site is **Wi\$e Up Women** (<http://wiseupwomen.tamu.edu/>; no Spanish-language pages), a curriculum developed by the Bureau to teach Gen X and Y women about personal money management. There’s great information in the lessons, although required registration creates a bit of a barrier to accessing them.

The Women’s Bureau page focuses primarily on its own programs. The general Department of Labor website does have another page of links to departmental pages of interest to women (<http://www.dol.gov/dol/audience/aud-women.htm>; links to some Spanish-language). Many of the links on this page are to sites with information of interest to workers in general; in fact, most of them also appear, in the same order, on the information page for “Workers.” The “Women” page does link to a few unique things — especially statistical reports in the “Employment & Labor Force Trends” and “Wages and Earnings” sections, and explanations of laws related to parental leave. Sadly, most of the statistical reports are from 2001 or earlier, reflecting in part the George W. Bush administration’s lack of commitment to collecting data about women.⁴

This last point illustrates one of the realities of federal websites — they reflect the priorities of a given administration. Each administration has the prerogative to change the pages, and for agencies, websites are ways to help fulfill their missions (explaining laws and regulations, providing forms that citizens have to fill out) and tout their achievements. That means presenting current information. Most agencies aren’t charged with maintaining a historical record. That’s why it’s so important that each presidential administration (and Congress) support agencies that *are* charged with

maintaining the historical record of government, such as the National Archives and Records Administration and the Government Printing Office. I can't argue strongly enough in favor of maintaining a free, accessible archive of the older pages of websites. Not only do students and historians want to know how administrations presented themselves to the public; but those in the legal field often need to know what laws and regulations were in effect at a given time, and how those were presented to people.

Two other economic-related sites illustrate some of the best and worst aspects of federal sites. **Social Security Information for Women** (<http://www.ssa.gov/women/>; accessibility info available by following the tiny link to "Website Policies...") is what I consider a "service" website, providing information that citizens need to interact with the program — from how to get a Social Security number for your newborn to an explanation of when a widow's benefits end. The site is not flashy, but it's attractive and easy to navigate. It acknowledges that the Social Security Administration (SSA) does not treat individuals differently on the basis of sex, but that the things it does do sometimes affect women differently than men. It's full of information, but its main page is not cluttered or distracting. I like its approach to grouping links and information by the life roles of women (working woman; beneficiary; bride; new mother; divorced spouse; caregiver; widow). The site and most of the publications it points to (including the comprehensive *What Every Woman Should Know*, updated January 2009, <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10127.html#1>) are available in Spanish and English. Quibbles: not every page (especially those that answer individual, frequently asked questions) includes an update date (but the publications do, and the dates that are noted are recent); and there are no links to statistics.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website (<http://www.eeoc.gov/>), another primarily "service site," is one of the more lackluster sites around. It provides texts of federal job discrimination laws (although the main "Laws" page hasn't been updated since 2004), lists discriminatory practices, and explains how to file a charge (the latter two pages were both updated in 2007). Fortunately, the pages under "Discrimination by Type: Facts and Guidance" have been updated in the last year, and the site does link to current EEOC regulations. What really struck me about this site, aside from its overall lack of timeliness, was how dreary it is. Except for the top page, most pages are just black-and-white text — the EEOC didn't even put its modest, two-color logo on most lower-level pages. I do give the EEOC credit for providing options for changing the font size and displaying plain text on its front page, and for providing

some pages in Arabic, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese writing systems, not just transliterations (<http://www.eeoc.gov/languages/index.html>). The main page has a section for statistics (one of the few sites I saw to make statistics so prominent), and the statistics are fairly up-to-date.

The Council is looking at issues related to both women and girls, so you'll want to check out the biggest — and one of the few — of the federal websites devoted to girls: **GirlsHealth.gov** (<http://www.girlshealth.gov/>), from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This site's stated target is girls aged 10–16, but I think that's stretching it. While it offers information useful to all ages, I think girls over 13 might find its approach a bit juvenile. The site addresses physical, mental, and emotional health for girls, reflected in its main sections: "Body," "Fitness," "Nutrition," "Illness & Disability," "Drugs, Alcohol & Smoking," "Your Emotions," "Relationships," "Bullying," "Safety," and "Your Future." It has lots of original, current content, although I wish there was a bit less text and a few more interactive components. I love that the site has a fairly comprehensive glossary that includes pronunciations. I also wish that it wasn't just the section for "Parents and Caregivers" that provided information in Spanish. I found the site easy to navigate, interesting, positive, and informative.

Much as I like **GirlsHealth.gov**, it has a few problems. It omits some very important concepts related to sexuality: sexual orientation, birth control, and pregnancy. On this site, the only birth control method really discussed, in the "Body" section, is abstinence (not surprising, given the politics of the previous administration). Search "birth control" using the website's search utility, and the highest number of results — five — comes up in the "Illness and Disability" section. (I do like the clustered search results!) In the "Body" section, there is a decent table covering sexually transmitted diseases, their symptoms, and treatments.

As I went through the site, I found myself wishing for more diversity in the images it uses, in terms of ethnicity and appearance generally, body types, and abilities. For instance, for all its solid information on living with disabilities, there were very few pictures anywhere on the site of girls with disabilities. I loved the interviews with teen achievers in the "Spotlight" section featured on the main page. A variety of areas are represented here — National Spelling Bee competitor, race car driver, performer, entrepreneurs, volunteers. Yet it kills me that nearly all the girls I see on the site are white!!

HHS's Office of Women's Health also has a health site for women, **WomensHealth.gov** (<http://www.womenshealth.gov/> or <http://www.4women.gov/>; with a very tiny link to "Accessibility" on the very bottom of the page). Evidently this is also the website of the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC). Given these multiple URLs and names, you might not be surprised to learn that I had a much harder time navigating this site than **GirlsHealth.gov**. It may be because the site has several primary audiences, including consumers, health providers, and researchers. The main page has links to items of interest for all these audiences, plus others, but there's no comprehensive grouping by audience (although there are some links labeled for particular groups, like media and health professionals). The titles of the sections are somewhat vague: should I look at "Health Organizations" if I want to find information *about* or *for* health organizations? (It's the former.) Then there's the all-too-frequently used (on *many* federal government sites) "Publications" section heading. How will "Our Publications" differ from "Health Topics?" And could I also find useful publications in the "Campaigns and Activities" section? I do like that the main page has a section for "Statistics" — too many websites, governmental and non-, bury statistics in "publications" or "library" sections. Overall, the site could benefit greatly from a site map or comprehensive site index. The site does cover many topics — health issues as they relate to lesbians, mercury and women's health, pregnancy, heart disease, quitting smoking, and violence against women (and even a bit on men's health).

I've got one more complaint about this site: it is difficult to locate links to other HHS general sites related to women's health. The "Health Organizations" section lacks links to the National Institutes of Health's **Women's Health** page (<http://health.nih.gov/category/WomensHealth>), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's joint **Office of Women's Health** (<http://www.cdc.gov/women/about.htm>), and the FDA's **Office of Women's Health** (<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/byAudience/ForWomen/default.htm>). **WomensHealth.gov** links to many topics pages from these organizations, but not directly to these other women-focused offices.

I hope this letter is helpful in a few ways: in giving you one framework for your assessment task; in identifying some things, good and bad, to look for in federal websites; and in providing you with some starting places to look for federal information for women and girls online. The great thing about the Web is that you just need a few sites to get started; links from a few can take you through the U.S. government and beyond, to governmental and non-governmental sites, from the local to the international level.

Thanks for your public service to this country and to women everywhere,

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Notes

1. Executive Order 13506, section 3 Federal register, Vol. 74, No. 49, Monday, March 16, 2009, p. 11272, <http://frwebgate5.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/PDFgate.cgi?WAISdocID=018637101535+0+2+0&WAIAction=retrieve>; accessed 03/25/09.
2. United States White House, "Opportunities Their Mothers and Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers Never Dreamed Of," U.S. White House Weblog, entry posted March 11, 2009, 4:31 p.m. EST; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog> (accessed 03/25/09).
3. An Act: To Establish in the Department of Labor a Bureau To Be Known as the Women's Bureau, Public Law 66-259, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 41, 1921.
4. See, for instance, National Council for Research on Women, *Missing: Information About Women's Lives*, posted March 2004; <http://www.ncrw.org/misinfo/report.htm#report> (accessed 06/09/09).

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