From Birth Control to Sex Control: Unruly Young Women and the Origins of the National Abstinence-Only Mandate

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Abstract. In the early 1980s, conservative politicians in the United States argued that the federal government was promoting promiscuity by providing teens with confidential access to government-funded family planning services. Claiming the problem was not that young women were getting pregnant but that they were having sex, they promised a new national policy—one that would stress self-discipline and family values over sexual indulgence. As argued in this paper, the resulting abstinence-only federal mandate both draws upon and reinforces traditional sexual scripts, which hold young women responsible for keeping male passion in check, thus selectively burdening them with the work of “doing abstinence.”

Keywords. family planning, New Right, abstinence-only education, virginity

Résumé. Au début des années 1980, un certain nombre de politiciens américains conservateurs ont argué du fait que le gouvernement fédéral promouvait la promiscuité sexuelle en permettant aux adolescentes d’avoir accès à des services de planning familial subventionnés, ce en toute confidentialité. Prétendant que le problème ne se trouvait pas dans le fait que les jeunes femmes puissent se retrouver enceintes mais dans le fait qu’elles avaient des relations sexuelles, ils ont promis une nouvelle politique nationale qui mettrait l’accent sur la maîtrise de soi et les valeurs familiales plutôt que sur la liberté sexuelle. Dans cet article, il s’agit de montrer que le mandat fédéral de promouvoir une éducation d’abstinence (« abstinence-only ») qui en a résulté repose en même temps qu’il renforce des scénarii sexuels traditionnels dans lesquels les jeunes femmes sont chargées de mettre en échec les pulsions masculines et ainsi responsables de la mise en pratique de l’abstinence.

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INTRODUCTION

Upon taking office in 1981, President Regan promptly sought to deliver on his campaign promise to reduce the role of the federal government in the domestic arena by announcing his plan to “repeal some 40 categorical health and social welfare programs, and to replace them with block grants to the states.” Programs targeted for elimination included Title X of the Public Health Services Act—the nation’s first comprehensive family planning program. Enacted in 1970, this bipartisan initiative was intended to make comprehensive family planning services “readily available to all persons desiring such services,” with priority given to expanding the access of low-income women to reliable contraceptives.

Seizing the opportunity presented by the proposed devolution of responsibility for family planning from the federal government to the states, staunch conservative Senator Orin Hatch (R-Utah), chair of the Senate Committee with oversight authority over family planning programs, convened a legislative hearing in March of 1981 to “examine the programs and practices that have been taking place under Title X of the Public Health Services Act.” Although ostensibly organized for the purpose of providing guidance to state policymakers in anticipation of their expanded role in the family planning arena, Hatch’s opening expression of “deep concern” about the “sometimes abuses that have taken place under Title X programs,” immediately suggested that the inquiry was unlikely to be an objective one.

That this would indeed prove to be the case was confirmed by Hatch’s appointment of his “good friend” Senator Jeremiah Denton (R-Alabama) to preside over the hearing. Denton was an equally impassioned conservative who had just been elected with the active support of New Right loyalists, and, in announcing his willingness to serve in this capacity, Hatch approvingly noted that as the new chair of the subcommittee with jurisdiction over family planning legislation, Denton shared his “deep concern” about Title X.

In stepping to the plate, Denton immediately pushed beyond Hatch’s general statement of concern about Title X. Portending the direction in which he intended to steer the hearing, Denton proclaimed in his opening remarks that Title X’s original mission of helping poor women to plan the “size of their families and the spacing of their children” had been subverted by a growing “misguided and ill-conceived” focus on teen pregnancy prevention. Locating this directional shift “at the very center of our concern,” he denounced Title X for “sowing seeds
of confusion” among the nation’s youth by sending them the message that “sexual intercourse among children is acceptable and inevitable,” in “contradistinction often to the moral values of [their] parents and pastors.”

As developed in this article, this hearing marks the start of a concerted conservative effort to reframe the problem facing young women as one involving the damaging nature of early sexual activity rather than the devastating consequences of teen motherhood—a trope that was subsequently picked up and amplified in a series of family planning oversight hearings that Senator Denton presided over between 1981 and 1984. Following a brief history of the origins of Title X and the rise of the New Right, we examine this pivotal shift as articulated by select witnesses who shared Denton’s conviction that Title X promoted promiscuity and encroached upon the rightful authority of parents to direct the moral upbringing of their children.

Grounded in this critique, the article then highlights the dynamic interplay between the conservative condemnation of Title X and the emergence of a pro-chastity discourse, which, in turn, set the stage for the enactment of a federal abstinence-only education law. It then argues that, although framed in gender-neutral language, this novel approach to the regulation of youthful bodies, as implemented in the classroom, is infused with gendered meaning that disproportionately burdens young women by casting them as moral gatekeepers in service of the law’s injunction that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human behavior.”

CONGRESS RESPONDS TO THE TEEN PREGNANCY “CRISIS”

When Title X was originally enacted in 1970, there was little, if any, focused discussion about the contraceptive needs of teen women. Although they were certainly included within the law’s broad mandate that family planning services be made available to “all persons desiring such services,” the focus was on expanding the access of low-income women to reliable contraceptives. Animated by racialized concerns about the excess fertility of poor urban (read black) women and by, at least among some liberal members of Congress, feminist concerns regarding the privileging of birth control, poor women were constituted as a priority population.

Accordingly, rather than resulting from a legislative strategy intended to help them to manage their fertility more effectively, young women’s initial right of access to Title X services was an incidental, if not unintended, consequence of the law’s inclusive mandate. In contrast to the “excess” fertility of poor women, the “premature” fertility of young women had not yet been identified as a public concern requiring
a legislative solution. By mid-decade, however, in the wake of declining adult fertility rates, public anxiety began mounting over what policymakers characterized as an “epidemic” of teen pregnancies, which was soon seen as “one of the most serious and complex social problems facing [the] nation.”

In 1978, Congress responded to these concerns by adding language to Title X making it clear that clinics were required to provide family planning services to adolescents. By firmly linking the provision of government-funded birth control to instrumental, as distinct from sexual ends, this bold move was framed as a morally neutral and much-needed social policy. Accordingly, as young women were constituted as a priority population within the national family planning program, the singular focus on managing the consequences of youthful sexual activity helped keep any underlying moral reservations in check.

However, buoyed by their electoral successes in the 1980 elections, including Ronald Regan’s successful bid for president, New Right activists unleashed a moral storm. This squall had been brewing since the mid-1960s when early architects of the New Right, who had become increasingly disillusioned by the Republican party’s apparent willingness to compromise with liberals on social issues in order to win elections, mobilized into an oppositional force outside party boundaries. United by their shared belief that the nation was being destroyed by the “social engineering” of the liberal elite, they declared that henceforth no “Republican ‘Uncle Tom’ could quiet them down to suit the liberals who owned the plantation.”

Of particular relevance, New Right leaders succeeded in mobilizing evangelical Christians who had existed on “the fringes of American religious and political life” since the early part of the 20th century into a cohesive political force. Propelled by fears that their community would no longer be able to “insulate itself from disturbing trends in the broader culture” that threatened their way of life, evangelicals joined the growing movement to take back the nation from the hated secular humanists who supported women’s equality, gay rights, school desegregation, and abortion. Standing firm in their opposition, they sought to protect their children from these destabilizing influences to ensure, as Duane M. Oldfield writes, the orderly transmission of their “subcultural values on to the next generation.”

As they moved into the electoral arena, New Right activists, including their recently mobilized evangelical colleagues, staked out a firm position on social concerns they believed were of vital importance to the survival of the nation. Although issues such as busing, gun control, and school prayer were integral to their nation-saving agenda, as Rosalind Petchesky writes: “[i]f there [was] anything genuinely ‘new’ about the current right wing in the United States, it [was] its tendency to locate
sexual, reproductive, and family issues at the center of its political pro-
gram.” Standing as a powerful symbol of liberal dissoluteness, it is thus not surprising that Title X quickly became a target of conservative fury.

“ONE AND A HALF BILLION DOLLARS IN THE HANDS OF TERRORISTS COULD NOT HAVE INFLICTED THE LONG-TERM HARM TO OUR SOCIETY THAT TITLE X HAS.” THE CONSERVATIVE ATTACK ON TITLE X

In his opening statement as Chair of the oversight hearing that Senator Hatch convened following the Administration’s proposal to fold Title X into a block grant, Senator Denton proclaimed he would “welcome evidence” showing that the program did indeed focus on “planning families or preparing teens for this responsibility.” However, in the next breath, Denton made clear that he thought this a chimerical goal, as he already knew this was “not the truth”—an unsurprising assessment given that only moments earlier he had denounced Title X clinics for “promulgating their own vision of morality” in contradistinction to the values held by the “parents and pastors” of most teenagers.

Accordingly, although Denton certainly invited Title X supporters to testify at the oversight hearings he presided over between 1981 and 1984, given his opening indictment of the program, it was fairly evident from the start that he was not genuinely interested in fostering an open and objective assessment of the federal government’s role in expanding adolescent access to contraceptives. Reinforcing this claim, and further signaling the subtext of the hearing, which, as developed below, helped set the stage for the emergence of a national abstinence-only educational mandate, Denton further stressed in his opening remarks that a program which “provides teens with values denying any need for self-restraint” could not possibly encourage “youthful habits leading to their long-range happiness or promoting parental involvement.”

Drawing on the testimony of select witnesses, this section seeks to elucidate the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between Title X supporters and its conservative critics who blamed the federal government for “funding the very problems [it] set out to eliminate.” In turn, the revelation of this “clash of two totally incompatible philosophies” underscores the dynamic link between the attack on Title X and the emergence of a pro-chastity strategy for managing unruly adolescent bodies and protecting young women from harm.

Title X has fostered an “Atmosphere in which teen promiscuity is viewed as normal and acceptable conduct.”

The foundational objection raised by critics to the inclusion of teens in Title X’s family planning program was that it was premised upon and in
turn promoted the false and morally bankrupt assumption that “sexual activity among children is acceptable and inevitable”—an assumption which, they asserted, was directly at odds with the belief system of most “parents and pastors.”22 Blaming the federal government for fostering an “atmosphere in which teen promiscuity is viewed as normal and acceptable conduct,”23 they argued the nation’s youth had been misled into believing it was fine for them to engage in premarital sexual activity so long as they took the necessary precautions to avoid the risk of pregnancy and disease.

Although proponents of providing teens with confidential family planning services did not stake out a “pro-sex” stance, it is safe to assume they did not view the underlying sexual activity with moral alarm, but rather accepted it as a normal part of growing up in the modern world. Recognizing that many adolescents would become sexually active during their teen years, supporters emphasized that Title X was intended to help them appreciate that if they became sexually active they had, as Barbara Maves, the Executive Director of a Planned Parenthood affiliate explained, an “obligation to be responsible … and provide themselves with contraception if they [were] not prepared to provide a good home for a child.”24

Rejecting the view that encouraging teens to use birth control was promoting responsible behaviour, witnesses sounded the alarm about the dangers of a “free-sex lifestyle.” According to Denton, nothing less than the future of civilization was at risk. Employing an historical lens, he argued that the recurring problem of sexual immorality had “delayed the dawn of civilization for millions of years and caused its fall every time it’s been tried as something new.” He elaborated that “the more sexually permissive a society becomes, the less creative energy it exhibits and the slower its movement toward rationality, philosophical speculation, and advanced civilization.”25 In a similar catastrophic vein, Dr. Ford, a California physician, warned that the new morality, with its hedonistic emphasis on the right of each individual to “decide for himself what is right and what is wrong,” would alienate young people “from God, from their parents, and from society at large,” and result in the demise of “the family and ultimately … the national soul.”26

Employing a distinctly gendered lens, a number of key witnesses also highlighted the risks that a promiscuous lifestyle posed to young women, thus reinforcing the conventional view that premarital sexual activity is intrinsically more damaging to women than it is to their male partners. Of particular note, in a direct reversal of the Title X paradigm, rather than connoting responsibility, the use of birth control was cast as an inherently damaging activity that imperiled a young woman’s future.
Nowhere is this infusion of values clearer than in the testimony of Dr. Ratner, the editor of the *Child and Family Quarterly*, who warned that the “sterilizing complications” of “the pill, IUD, abortion, and venereal disease,” were nature’s way of avenging a sexually dissolute lifestyle. asserting his belief that nature had no choice but to “strike back and exact retribution,” when its precept against “early promiscuous sex and multiple partners” was violated, he cautioned that young women who disregarded the command to remain chaste risked destroying their fertility—which, he proclaimed, was their greatest treasure. Asserting that many “sexually active women [had discovered] the flaws of a carefree life,” he stressed the importance of ensuring that young women understood that they “only have one body; that it is not a rehearsal body which can be turned in for a new one after the fun is over. That it is a body that has to last a life time.”

Also raising the specter of infertility, Dr. John Hillabrand, an obstetrician and gynecologist, testified that the use of birth control was neutering girls and converting them into “sexual playthings for the entertainment of young men.” Proclaiming that “the ruination of mothers, babies, and families [was] at the root core of our evils of society today,” he cautioned young women against engaging in sexual activity that might damage their procreative potential, thus depriving themselves of the opportunity to enjoy the “indispensable” mother-baby relationship in the future.

Fertility loss was not the only future harm that lay in wait to snare the unsuspecting girl who had strayed. Having been “pawed over,” she now, according to Dr. Ray Short, a sociology professor, was damaged goods who was less desirable as a wife than the woman who had remained pure. Moreover, even if a non-virgin was lucky enough to find a man who would marry her, he warned that her marriage was likely to fail due to the apparent fact she was far more likely to cheat on her husband than the virgin bride.

Apart from risking her future, some witnesses spoke of the emotional costs of a promiscuous lifestyle. According to Denise Coccioalone, Executive Director of Birthright, the anti-natalist ethos of the family planning establishment that encouraged girls to “do whatever they choose, so long as they do not get pregnant,” had transformed them into sexual objects for the pleasure of young men, thus resulting in a troubling loss of self-worth. Dr. Short advised that girls were also far more likely than boys to be plagued by sex-induced guilt due to their breach of societal expectations. As he explained: “every time they have premarital sex, they are probably going to … experience guilt feelings because they know their society, particularly their parents and their religion, is against it. They have sex, they have guilt—sometimes a real guilt trip.”
Having discursively constituted the sexually active, as distinct from the pregnant, young woman as the problematic subject, critics blamed Title X for exacerbating the problems it was attempting to address. Accordingly, rather than continuing to throw fuel on the fire, Denton argued that the time had come for Congress and the family planning community to join together to “send the factual message to our children that early sexual involvement creates risks, problems, and unhappiness that cannot be solved by a pill.”

PARENTS, NOT THE GOVERNMENT, ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPARTING MORAL VALUES TO CHILDREN

Closely entwined with their critique that Title X encouraged promiscuous behavior, opponents also charged that by providing teens with access to confidential family planning services, the government was intruding into the sacred realm of the family. Lambasting the exclusion of parents—a practice one witness referred to as a “parentectomy,” they argued that this unwelcome interference undermined the natural authority of parents over their children. When Denton thus commented that: “my hurting point is when the little girl is at the point of decision, she is being advised by one side; the parents are not permitted into it. That seems to me a hideous development in this Government,” he appears to have been suggesting that this alleged alienation of children from their parents was equally as objectionable as Title X’s implicit recognition of teens as sexual persons.

Faye Wattleton, President of Planned Parenthood of America, explained that “most programs make every effort to encourage their young patients to talk to their parents,” but this did little to allay the concerns of critics who insisted that teens needed to be protected from “exploitation by these meddlesome adults” who wrongly believed they had a “more sacred right to establish a relationship with a child than the parents.” Stressing the inviolability of the traditional family unit, parents were heralded as the essential counterweight to the false message of moral relativity promulgated by family planning clinics. As Dr. Ford elaborated:

For generations, parents taught their children moral responsibility and gave them the foundation on which to build their own families.... It gave children reasons for preserving the chastity [sic] and it supported them in doing so until they were mature enough to make responsible decisions about their sexual faculties....[If] parents are to be effective in giving their children the moral training they so desperately need, they will have to be supported not undermined by government policies and the medical profession.

Thus, in addition to promoting promiscuity, Title X was further blamed for fracturing the organic unity of the traditional family.
TEENS ARE NOT JURIDICAL PERSONS

Although opponents tended to frame their objections to Title X in moralistic and pro-family terms, a brief but pointed exchange between Senator Denton and Faye Wattleton suggests that another critical point of departure was the Act’s implicit acceptance of teens as juridical persons with rights over their own bodies. Turning to this exchange, in response to Ms. Wattleton’s comment that she would personally welcome the involvement of a community agency in the event her daughter could not “discuss her concerns and her questions about her sexuality,” Denton replied that he and many others were not “particularly comfortable” with the idea of an agency working with “unemancipated teenagers,” who are first and foremost “connected with [their] parents.”

Significantly, Ms. Wattleton made no attempt to refute Denton’s protestation that Title X clinics viewed teens who came in for family planning services as individuals with legally cognizable rights to privacy, but rather stressed the centrality of this understanding of adolescent personhood in the reproductive health context—an understanding which, she noted, had been expressly affirmed by the courts. Speaking specifically about Planned Parenthood, she accordingly remarked that the organization was “dedicated to the rights of each individual to make his or her decision about their life’s destiny … consistent with the Constitutional guarantees of privacy.” Making clear that this promise embraced young people, she thus explained that when a young woman walked into a clinic for care, she was “treated as an individual with her own medical and sexual history [and] her own needs and circumstances.”

THE FEDERAL ABSTINENCE-ONLY MANDATE

In 1981, Senators Hatch and Denton successfully shepherded the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) through Congress. Seeking to help teens avoid the “disillusionment, depression, and guilt,” associated with early sexual activity by promoting the benefits of chastity, AFLA was conceived of as a moral counterweight to Title X’s “essentially dehumanizing” approach. Extolling the benefits of this paradigm shift, Dr. Mildred F. Jefferson, President of the National Right to Life, pronounced AFLA a much-welcomed response to the pernicious “secular-humanist tradition” with its “avowed objective of displacing the influence of the mystical religions in our national life.” Delighted with this praise, Denton responded that he wished her remarks could be broadcast on national prime time television on a daily basis.

In direct contrast to Title X’s emphasis on the importance of helping adolescents take responsibility for their sexual choices, AFLA sought to
impose order on the unruly teen body by resurrecting parents as the
gatekeepers of their children’s moral well-being. Holding out the prom-
ise of redemption from a government-sanctioned culture of promiscuity,
which, as discussed, critics believed was particularly damaging to young
women, the Act offered grants to family-centered programs that “pro-
moted self-discipline and other prudent approaches to the problem of
adolescent premarital sexual relations.”

AFLA was an important moral victory for conservatives. Crafted
as a counterweight to the “free-sex/anti-parent” ideology of Title X, it
allowed conservatives to take credit for rescuing youth from the ravages
of a sex-saturated culture and for restoring the sanctity of the nuclear
family. Overtime, however, some conservative lawmakers apparently
grew concerned that AFLA was not strict enough. In particular, they
felt “duped” by the fact that rather than being used to advance an
unequivocal abstinence message, funds were being used to support “a
range of programs, including those that combine[d] an abstinence mes-
 sage with information about contraceptives.” Seeking to tighten the
reins, they called for a stricter approach that would present teens with
the “single, unambiguous message that sex outside marriage is wrong
and harmful to their physical and mental health.”

In 1996 Congress heeded the call. Again responding to “to what many
legislators saw as a ‘pro-sex’ government policy of providing contracep-
tive services to … young women through the Title X clinic program,” it
approved a major new initiative that promised $50 million annually to
the states for the implementation of a strict abstinence-until-marriage
education program. As Ron Haskins and Carol Statuto Bevan of the
House Ways and Means Committee explain, this program was designed
to “align Congress with the social tradition … that sex should be con-
fined to marriage” and “as in the case of civil rights and smoking” to
“change both behavior and community standards for the good of the
country.” Accordingly, any program that “in any way endorse[d], sup-
port[ed] or encourage[d] sex before marriage,” was strictly ineligible for
federal funding.

This new abstinence-only education program was grafted onto the
final version of the sweeping overhaul of the nation’s welfare law—a
stage in the legislative process that is usually “reserved for corrections
and technical revisions” rather than for major substantive additions,
which meant that conservative lawmakers were able to translate their
moral agenda into a well-funded and robust national policy without
“a Congressional floor debate or a separate vote [or] any open public
debate.” To ensure that the forcefulness of a pure abstinence message
would not be “captured or watered down” by liberals, the new statute
expressly designated marriage as the only acceptable site of sexual activ-
ity across the life span. To be eligible for funding, programs were thus


required to have as their “exclusive purpose” the teaching of the “gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity,” and to teach that a “mutually faithful, monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity.”

Expanding the reach of this new national morality policy, states were required to match every four dollars of federal abstinence funds they received with three dollars of their own.

In this regard it should be noted that since 1996, a growing number of states have legalized same-sex marriage. However, given the explicitly heterosexist origins of the federal abstinence-only mandate, it is unlikely that it will ever be read to embrace the sexual expression of even those same-sex couples who have stepped across the proverbial marital threshold, thus reinforcing the message to gay youth that their desire is so beyond the pale that, unlike heterosexual desire, their embrace cannot even be sanctioned by marriage.

ENGENDERING THE ABSTINENCE MESSAGE

Written in gender neutral language, the federal definition of a qualifying abstinence-education program does not appear to privilege female over male purity as would be the case if, for example, it was required to teach that “abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage was the expected standard for all school-age girls,” rather than for “all school age children” or that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects on girls.” However, as argued in this section, a deeply gendered reality runs beneath this seemingly neutral surface.

In looking at this gap, it may be useful to borrow the “disparate impact” theory of discrimination from the employment law arena. In brief, rather than simply looking at whether a law expressly treats one group differently from another, such as by banning women from maximum prison guard security positions, this approach focuses on whether, for example, a law that is “fair in form,” such as one that requires all potential employees to meet a minimum height and weight requirement, turns out to be “discriminatory in its operation,” because it excludes a disproportionate number of otherwise qualified female applicants from consideration. Utilizing this theory to frame our inquiry, the salient question is whether, despite its being “fair in form,” the federal abstinence mandate places a disproportionate burden on the shoulders of young women based upon a gendered conception of adolescent sexuality. Focusing first on the legislative origins of this mandate and then turning to an examination of a leading abstinence-only text, as developed below, the answer to this question appears to be a resounding “yes.”
Beneath the surface: The legislative context

A logical place to begin our inquiry into the question of whether the federal abstinence mandate has a disparate impact on young women, is with a brief return to the Title X oversight hearings, which set the stage for this morality based approach to adolescent sexuality. As discussed, in seeking to shift the locus of concern from the pregnant teen to the sexualized one, witnesses looked at the harms of a “free-sex” lifestyle through a gendered lens. Warning that the costs of promiscuity were disproportionately born by young women, who, as a result of their indulgence, risked a future marred by guilt, sterility, and marital instability, they argued for redemption through the regulation of desire. In short, although the resulting abstinence laws employed gender-neutral language, they were rooted in concerns about female sexual behaviour, which conservative lawmakers believed had been distorted by the federal government’s endorsement of promiscuity.

Of course, these gendered preoccupations are not surprising given that the concept of virginity has been inextricably linked to the female body. As Hanne Blank writes in her monograph on the subject: “The male body has never commonly been labeled as virginal even when it is, but rather as ‘continent’ or ‘celibate’... virgins are, and always have been, almost uniformly female.” Moreover, although male sexual continence has at times been regarded as a sign of masculine strength and power, virginity, as Blank comments, has never “mattered in regard to the way men are valued, or whether they were considered fit to marry or, indeed, to be permitted to survive” as is often the case for women. Steeped in these traditional understandings, it is clear why conservatives viewed Title X, which implicitly honored the right of young women to make their own decisions about the value of their virginity, as a frontal assault upon deeply cherished values—a vision which, as we will see, directly shaped the gendered actualization of the federal abstinence mandate.

Moreover, the fact that the 1996 abstinence-only-until marriage law came into being as part of a sweeping overhaul of the nation’s welfare law also attests to the racialized nature of this gendered subtext. Aptly titled the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reform Act (PRWORA),” this law was conceived of as a solution to the rise in “illegitimate” births based on the “value position that sex outside marriage is wrong and the consequences severe for mother, child, and society.” Laced with stereotypic assumptions about black female sexuality, PRWORA sought to channel young women into marriage by imposing strict limits on welfare benefits.

Highlighting how the intersection of race and gender shaped the symbiotic relationship between welfare reform and abstinence
education, a 1995 Heritage Foundation report aptly entitled “Combatting Illegitimacy and Counseling Teen Abstinence: A Key Component of Welfare Reform,” stressed that “personal virtue is the key to responsible adulthood,” and that the “American culture must provide the concepts of virtue toward which adolescents can strive.”58 By embedding the “concept of virtue” in the marriage standard, the promotion of abstinence education as “a centerpiece in the war against welfare” was closely linked to the broader cultural project of fashioning an “ideal female sexual subject whose demonized opposite was the … black pregnant teen on welfare.”59 In seeking to persuade the irresponsible procreator to take “personal responsibility” for her sexual behavior, conservatives thus hoped to harness the moral power of abstinence-only education to do the work of welfare reform.

It is also worth considering whether gendered considerations contributed to the critique that Title X was responsible for disrupting the parent-child bond. Given that almost all users of Title X family planning services were (and continue to be) female, as a practical matter, the statutory right of sexual self-determination was effectively vested in young women, thus primarily impacting the parent-daughter, as distinct from the parent-son, relationship. Considered in this light, Denton’s earlier referenced comment about it being a “hideous development” that when a “little girl is at the point of decision, she is being advised by one side [and her] parents are not permitted into it”60 certainly suggests that there was something particularly disturbing about the fact that Title X was effectively freeing young women from parental oversight of their sexual lives.

Although fathers in the United States no longer have a legally cognizable property interest in their daughter’s virginity, two contemporary cultural practices suggest that at least on a symbolic level, they have retained some vestigial authority over their sexuality. The most visible expression of this continued acceptance of paternal surveillance is the contemporary purity ball phenomena. Originally conceived of by Randy Wilson, who, together with his wife, Lisa, founded the Generations of Light Ministry, the first such ball was held in Colorado Springs in 1998, and, although there are no precise figures regarding how many balls are held annually, the Ministry’s website proudly proclaims that “the Father Daughter Purity Ball has become a national movement and is now in 48 states.”61

Styled as a formal prom-like, or some would say wedding-like, event, these balls provide fathers with the opportunity to help their daughters “realize the truth that they are infinitely valuable princesses who are ‘worth waiting for.’”62 Concretizing this aspirational vision, the highlight of the evening is when fathers gather to sign a pledge committing to be the guardian of their daughters’ virginity; at some balls, the daughters
also sign a reciprocal pledge committing their virginity to their fathers until their wedding day.

The other practice is the still vibrant custom of a father “giving away” his daughter in marriage. As a figurative foreshadowing of the wedding night, after the delivery of the bride by her father and the exchange of vows, the husband is told he may lift her veil and kiss the bride, signifying he now has a lawful right of access to her body, which he did not possess prior to the symbolic transfer of the bride from father to husband. Outwardly manifesting her new sexual status, at this point, the bride customarily sheds her paternally bestowed “maiden” name for her husband’s name, thus completing the representational transition from virginal girl to post-virginal wife.

Similar to the way in which the federal encoding of the abstinence mandate reflected a heightened concern about young women’s sexuality, it is thus also possible that the focus on the restoration of the moral authority of parents over their children was likewise prompted by gendered considerations. Seeking to reverse the “hideous” situation of “little girls” making sexual and reproductive decisions on their own, it is arguably the bodies of daughters that conservatives were hoping to safeguard by reining in their autonomy in favor of increased parental surveillance.

Beneath the surface: “What we are, and what a difference!”

Continuing our inquiry into the gendered impact of the federal abstinence mandate, we move from its legislative origins to its expression in the classroom. Despite the neutral encoding of the abstinence message that sexual activity is to be deferred until marriage, it is not uncommon for gender stereotypes to be deployed to get this message across. For example, Doan and Williams used a two-stage content analysis of four leading abstinence texts that coded “manifest” themes and the “latent content of the texts to assess the underlying meaning, or tone, in which the themes were addressed.” They concluded that to varying degrees these texts generally “underscore[d] rather than question[ed] traditional gender norms,” which they defined to include “the notions that men’s and women’s biological differences translate to significant differences in temperament, capacity for emotion, views and experiences related to sexuality, and life choices and abilities.” Similarly, a report prepared for Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), concluded that many abstinence-only curricula present “stereotypes,” such as that “girls care less about achievement and their futures than do boys,” as “scientific fact.”

A quick perusal of the comprehensive review of popular abstinence curricula conducted by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) readily reveals the extent to which many rely upon gender stereotypes in their effort to persuade teens
to remain chaste. For example, deconstructing the messages in the vignettes and student activities that are included in Choosing the Best Way, “one of the more popular abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula series in the country,” SIECUS concluded that it presents the “stereotypical view that men desire casual sexual activity from any and all women while women only agree to sexual activity to get love.” Illustrating perhaps one of the more blatant uses of sexual stereotypes, the WAIT (Why Am I Tempted) curriculum teaches students that:

women need affection while men need sexual fulfillment; women need conversation while men need recreational companionship; women need honesty and openness while men need physical attractiveness; women need financial support while men need admiration, and women need family commitment while men need domestic support.67

Although more unabashed than many, this essentialized representation of gender difference highlights how normative assumptions about male and female roles infiltrate the abstinence universe.

Based upon a close textual reading of Sex Respect, a leading abstinence-only curriculum, this article seeks to enrich the existing discourse about the infusion of traditional gender norms into these curricula by locating it within the originating context of the Title X oversight hearings. Rooted in the interlaced critique of adolescent promiscuity and the elevation of self-discipline as strategy for managing unruly young bodies, as presented here, this gendered understanding is woven into the very fabric of the abstinence law’s repudiation of the notion of a healthy self-defining and actualizing adolescent sexuality.

Sex Respect was selected for this purpose for two primary reasons. First, it is a popular text, which, according to its author Dr. Coleen Kelly Mast, has been “taught in over 3,000 school districts in the U.S. and in 23 foreign countries,” thus making it in her words the “world’s leading abstinence program.” More importantly, however, it was the first curriculum to be developed with AFLA funds, and its birth thus embodies the dynamic link between the attack on Title X and the emergence of the pro-chastity approach for managing adolescent desire. As Connaught C. Marshner, a contributing editor for Conservative Digest, explains:

… the Adolescent Family Life Act was written expressly for the purpose of diverting [federal] money that would otherwise go to Planned Parenthood into groups with traditional values. That noble purpose has certainly been fulfilled here. And, if it hadn’t been for the seed money provided by the government, Sex Respect might just be an idea sitting in a graduate student’s thesis. 69

Praising the text, Marshner characterizes it as a “genuine success story for conservatives, for the American people, and for the Reagan Administration.”70
Establishing the biological template for the classic allocation of sexual accountability, Chapter One of the Student Workbook, which is aptly entitled, *Sex: What We Are and What a Difference*, informs students that the “gift of ... gender” is assigned to them before their “heart starts beating.” Fusing gender with biological sex, they learn that their masculine or feminine design is irrevocably inscribed upon their pre-natal selves. The world into which these essentialized bodies are then born is cleaved into dichotomous realms of experience. Marked by global differences with respect to how they “communicate ... think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need, and appreciate,” it is not surprising to learn that men and women “almost seem to be from different planets” where they speak “different languages and [need] different nourishment.”

Firmly grounded in this gender binary with its totalizing construction of masculine and feminine identities, students are then introduced to the all-important theme of “male-female sexual differences.” Presented in a chatty and relaxed interview format featuring Dr. Specter, who is identified as a psychologist and teen guidance counselor, girls are advised that with the onset of puberty they “must start acting as well-mannered ladies, instead of uncontrolled children, since they are capable of having a child and need to protect this potential gift by respecting the power to help give life to a child.” Reminiscent of the view articulated in many 19th-century medical texts that in women, “the sexual instinct is co-opted by the maternal instinct,” Sex Respect likewise directly links a girl’s emerging sexual capacity to her future reproductive role, rather than to desire and pleasure.

In direct contrast to the maternalized sexuality of “normal” young women, Dr. Specter explains that although the urge may be stronger in some boys than in others, all young men experience a “natural desire for sex” due to the testosterone surging through their bodies. Although linked to what Specter refers to as the “mating instinct,” the awakening of male desire is presented as having an independent life force. In sharp contrast to adolescent girls in whom the sexual body is merged with the procreative body, adolescent boys are characterized as naturally sexual beings in whom desire is triggered by ordinary life events, such as looking at a girl or “thinking about or getting ready for a date.”

Dr. Specter acknowledges that some young women do express an interest in sex. However, in contrast to the embodied nature of male desire, their desire is represented as non-corporeal in origin. Rather than being read as an expression of the authentic female self, it instead suggests that something has gone awry. According to Specter, the problem is that some girls have allowed popular culture, with its lifting of the “stigma from non-virgins” and its veneration of “provocative women” to override “their natural instincts,” thus reconstructing their libidos along male lines. In a subsequent chapter, the “liberation movement”
is also identified as a corrupting influence that produces “aggressive girls” who, in a reversal of roles, seek to pressure their boyfriends into having sex, without regard for the fact that this “threat to a guy’s masculinity is a very sensitive blow.”

In addition to refashioning girls into sexual aggressors, we also learn that external influences, as distinct from genuine bodily desire, make it more likely that a girl will capitulate to her boyfriend’s sexual advances. This is not, of course, intended to suggest that sexual coercion is not a genuine issue; rather, the point here is that this representation reinforces the idea that because young women have little natural interest in sex, any expression of desire must be read as inauthentic. Of particular importance, Dr. Specter cautions that girls who lack “male attention in their home” may try and satisfy this “unmeet need” through indiscriminate sexual encounters.

Highlighting this danger, a subsequent chapter introduces us to a lonely teen named LaWanda. Abandoned by her father following her parents’ divorce, and also aware she is not particularly pretty, LaWanda is pursued by Calvin, a popular ladies’ man, who is “everything she imagined her father to be.” Believing herself to be in love with him, LaWanda gives into Calvin’s pressure to have sex so as not to lose him. She also admits that she wouldn’t mind having a baby with him. Predictably, Calvin subsequently decides it’s time to move on, leaving LaWanda “torn apart by the pain of being left alone by the men in her life.”

In addition to reinforcing the central message of Sex Respect that sexual desire in women is inauthentic and non-corporeal in nature, the story also raises troubling racial stereotypes. A SIECUS’ analysis of this curriculum points out, given that “most other stories in Sex Respect feature young people with names like Ron, Erica, Cindy, and Joe” it is likely that the name LaWanda was chosen to indicate that this story involves African-American teens. However, rather than suggesting an even-handed inclusivity, it “is replete with stereotypes about the African-American community that represent young men as players, young women as wanting to have babies, and all families as living without fathers.” Doan and Williams likewise argue that the seemingly “color-blind” approach of the abstinence curricula they analyzed is highly problematic as their failure to “overtly address race and ethnicity, racial stereotypes, or the extent to which race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation shape social constructions of sexuality and lived experience for teens” does not mean these texts are not racialized, but rather that they are “raced white, where whiteness is perceived as the norm” and departures from those norms are viewed as “strange or wrong.”

Returning to LaWanda, the story is also problematic because she is one of the only young women in the Workbook who actually gives into
the pressure to have sex. This, of course, raises the troubling stereotype of the hypersexual black teen who has little control over her libido, thus implicitly suggesting that abstinence education may be particularly important for teens of color whose trangressive bodies are coded as disruptive of the purity ideal—an ideal that has long been associated with middle-class whiteness.81

Setting these anomalous situations involving girls-gone-wrong aside, the Student Workbook makes clear that because young women are “less impulsive and more level-headed about sex,” they are responsible for keeping male passion in check. As sexual gatekeepers, it is their job to slow their boyfriends down and help them to “learn balance in a relationship through sexual abstinence.”82 To assist them with this crucial task, the Workbook is sprinkled with advice about how best to manage male passion.

Of critical importance, young women are taught to appreciate the fact that although they “are turned on by their hearts,” guys are “turned on by their senses.”83 Accordingly, it is their responsibility to carefully manage their appearance so as not to incite male lust. To be avoided are “plunging necklines and short skirts,” which are likely to distract even the most decent young man who is trying hard to “respect girls” by keeping a lid on his lust. Reflected in the catchy line “If you show them some skin, the hormones rush in,” the Workbook makes clear that he is not to be blamed for being aroused by visual stimuli. Rather, the message is that fault lies with the young woman for failing to recognize her triggering behavior, since, after all, unlike hormonal surges, sexy clothing is avoidable.84

Young women are also given tips on how to prevent matters from getting out of hand. As sexual gatekeepers, they are entrusted with the task of helping the young men in their lives to appreciate that “sex is not a test of love,” and that healthy relationships entail “getting to know each other’s hearts and minds” rather than one another’s bodies. If a boyfriend will not take “no” for an answer, a young woman is instructed to accept the fact that “he doesn’t respect” her and she is advised to “let him find someone else” who presumably will not turn him down85—a message that, of course, implicitly distinguishes between those girls who deserve respect and those who do not.

CONCLUSION

Although on the surface, the federal abstinence mandate appears to hold young men and women to the same sexual standard, as discussed, this surface neutrality belies a deeply gendered implementation strategy that draws upon traditional sexual scripts in order to recruit young women as the gatekeepers of morality. The perpetuation of these
gender stereotypes is deeply troubling. By sending the message that youthful male desire is a naturally embodied impulse, while its expression for girls signals that their natural gravitational pull towards purity has been corrupted—teen women are disempowered from developing an authentic sexual self, which was the originating impulse behind the conservative attack on Title X’s implicit acceptance of young women as capable of making decisions about their own bodies.

Even though not the focus of this article, it would be remiss to conclude without commenting on the fact that the potential damage done to young women by encasing their bodies in layers of gendered assumptions may well go beyond the erasure of desire, which, of course, is problematic in and of itself. More particularly, in light of findings that there “does not seem to be any strong evidence that any abstinence program delays the initiation of sex, hastens the return to abstinence, or reduces the number of sexual partners,”86 the wholesale ban on providing teens with information about contraceptives within federally supported abstinence-only education programs (other than permitted discussions about their failure rates) also disproportionately burdens young women by exposing those who become sexually active to the risk of unintended pregnancy—the very result that Title X sought to prevent in the first place.

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NOTES

5 Although these matters were typically entrusted to the Subcommittee on Aging, Family, and Human Services of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which Senator Denton chaired, due to the importance of the issue, Senator Hatch opted to provide the full committee with “the benefit of the oversight hearing,” “Hearing on Oversight of Family Planning Programs,” p. 1. The other hearings discussed in this article (see note 7 below) were held at the subcommittee level.
7 These hearings include: Senate Subcommittee on Aging, Family, and Human Services of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, “Oversight on the Role of the Federal Government in Family Planning Administered under Title X of the Public Health Services Act,” 97th Congress, 1st session, (23 June & 28 September 1981); Senate Subcommittee on Aging, Family, and Human Services of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, “Examination of the Alarming Increase in the Rate of Sexual Relations Among Adolescents,” 97th Congress, 2d session, (19 April 1982); and Senate Subcommittee on Family and Human Services of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, “Consideration of the Reauthorization of Title X of the Public Health Service Act, The Population Research and the Voluntary Family Planning Programs,” 98th Congress, 2d session, (5 April & 1 May 1984).

8 Title V, Section 510 (b)(2)(D) of the Social Security Act (PL. 104-193).


12 Amendment to the Public Health Services Act, PL. 95-613, 9th Congress (8 November 1978).


16 Oldfield, The Right and the Righteous, p. 66.


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29 Dr. Ray Short, (19 April 1982), p. 33.
31 Dr. Ray Short, (19 April 1982), p. 37.
45 Title XX of the Public Health Services Act, 42 UCS 300Z-5(a2)(A) & 300Z-10 (a) and (a)(10)(A), (1981) (b)(1).
52 Codified as section 510 of Title V of the Social Security Act. In 2000, Congress approved a third abstinence funding stream known as the Community-Based Abstinence Education program (CBAE). The most generously funded of the three federal abstinence programs, community groups, including faith-based organizations, could apply directly under CBAE to the federal government for funding without having to go through a state review process, thus facilitating the channeling of funds to the vanguards of the abstinence cause.
However, in fiscal year 2010, the Obama Administration and Congress eliminated the funding for the CBAE and the abstinence-only component of AFLA (the Act also allocates funds for services to pregnant and parenting teens.) Subsequently, Congress permitted the funding for Title V’s abstinence-only-until-marriage program to expire. However, conservative lawmakers ultimately succeeded “in resurrecting the program when they managed to insert funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in the Senate health care reform legislation (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act), which was signed by President Obama.” “A Brief History: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Funding.” http://www.nomoremoney.org. Accessed 4 July 2012.


Blank, Virgin, p. 10.


Colleen Kelly Mast, Sex Respect: The Option of True Sexual Freedom, Student Workbook (Bradley, Ill.: Respect incorporated, 2001). This is the title of the first chapter in the Student Workbook.


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http://www.communityactionkit.org, quoting: WAIT Training, p. 119. As SIECUS and others have concluded, the reliance on gender stereotypes is but one of the many serious problems with abstinence curricula. As documented in its review of a wide range of abstinence curricula, many also, for example, present inaccurate medical information, rely upon shaming strategies, and marginalize LGBT youth and families.


Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 6, quoting John Gray, who is identified as a “popular author and psychologist and author from the 1990s.”

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 10.


Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 13.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 12.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 97.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 12

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook.


Doan and Williams, The Politics of Virginity, p. 97-98.


Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 12.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 94.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 95.

Mast, Sex Respect, Student Workbook, p. 96.