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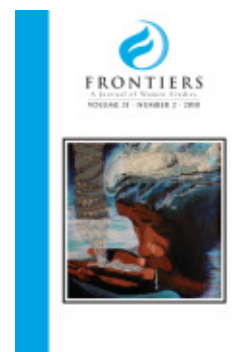
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## **Daddy's Little Girls On the Perils of Chastity Clubs, Purity Balls, and Ritualized Abstinence**

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# Daddy's Little Girls

*On the Perils of Chastity Clubs,  
Purity Balls, and Ritualized Abstinence*

BREANNE FAHS

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a surge in public attention to the culture of chastity, including purity balls, chastity clubs, and other public declarations of abstinence and asexuality. Building on the welfare reform act of 1996—which introduced abstinence-only sexual education primarily as a social mechanism of control over lower-income women of color—the past eight years have ushered in a sharp increase in the visibility of and funding for abstinence-only programs targeted at young women across the spectrum of raced and classed backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> As widespread efforts to block federal and state funding for comprehensive sexual education have succeeded, a rush of support for abstinence-only education has taken its place, despite lack of evidence for its effectiveness in delaying teenage sex, preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and promoting contraception usage. With this newfound interest in abstinence-only education, schools around the country have reported a dramatic increase in the emergence of groups on campus whose sole purpose is to support the “culture of purity.” Such groups typically recruit members by appealing to their desire to please their parents, God, and their peers by resisting sexual temptation. Although girls from elementary through high school represent the majority of participants in chastity clubs, there is also a rise in the popularity of these clubs on university campuses, and Ivy League campuses in particular, in which women organize with the singular goal of protecting female purity.

When speaking of the irony of sexual repression fostering sexual obsession, Foucault argued, “It is said that no society has been more prudish; never have the agencies of power taken such care to feign ignorance of the thing they prohibited, as if they were determined to have nothing to do with it. But it is the opposite that has become apparent, at least after a general review of the

facts: never have there existed more centers of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup> As such, our obsession with restraining sexual expression has led to the sex-obsessed culture of chastity, including purity balls, virginity clubs, and ritualized celibacy pledges. Although these organizations and clubs around the country are not exclusively for women, or exclusively designed by women, they overwhelmingly focus on the recruitment of young women by appealing to their collective desires to fight “the urge to merge.” My central argument puts forth that this particular construction of sexuality results in a highly gendered social space that reinforces women’s oppressed sociosexual status as the property of men, inadequately prepares them for negotiating the terms of their sexual health, and encourages them to seek out chastity clubs and social spaces that construct an identity based on enforced repression of sexual desire and expression. As such, issues of personal agency—for example, the extent to which women *choose* or, alternatively, are *pushed into* these social spaces—represent a crucial problem in the culture of chastity, one I will address here in detail.

This article includes four sections that collectively examine the social spaces in which chastity is rewarded, nurtured, and publicly flaunted. As an outline of the major points covered in this piece, I first examine the social meaning of chastity rituals, including their effects on women’s sexual socialization, ideologies of sexual violence, and their relationship to “losing” virginity. The central claim in this first section is that the gendered space of chastity clubs encourages women to adopt the worldview that women are distinctly and essentially different from men and that sexuality is itself dangerous, resulting in, for example, the construction of sexual *violence* as “giving in” to temptation.

Second, I examine the perils and dangers of the culture of chastity, including a survey of recent studies that show increased sexual risk-taking among women who have joined chastity clubs, as well as an analysis of the relationship between traditionalist religious teachings and young women’s sexual behavior. When only the most literal and ritualized definition of sex is promoted—that is, penile penetration of a vagina—those who pledge chastity also report a sharp increase in unprotected fellatio and anal sex. I unpack and examine these complexities and closely analyze contributions of social science research in understanding women’s sexual behavior. I conclude this section by discussing the culture of chastity as simultaneously repressive and, perhaps, generative and productive as a social identity.

Third, I examine differences among chastity clubs, noting similarities and differences between groups aimed at younger teenage girls versus older teen-

age girls. A special consideration of Ivy League chastity clubs—spaces in which women identify simultaneously with the academic elite and with Evangelical religious practices—is included in this section. I draw upon girls’ studies material to consider the different implications of chastity clubs organized in adolescence compared with clubs organized in the midst of young adulthood, particularly surrounding implications of privacy and subversion of social norms implied by women-only spaces.

Finally, I analyze the increasing prevalence of purity balls and the symbolic impact of women publicly embracing and celebrating their status as sexual property. These ceremonies—in which women essentially “marry” their fathers (until their wedding day, when they are given away), sign chastity pledges, and accept rings or other jewelry that literally marks their body as property—situate women and their bodies in a model of sexual commerce. Since fathers become the mechanism through which young women channel and suppress their sexual urges, the psychoanalytic implications are also considered.

Ultimately, I argue that chastity clubs promote a social space that normalizes the oppression of women’s bodies via severe control over their developing sexual expression, resulting not only in a reinscription of their bodies as sexual property but also in the acceptance of some of the most literal terms of patriarchal culture: women’s bodies exchanged between men, communities of women organized around the negation of their sexual desire, little attention to the role of mothers in the sexual socialization process, and old-fashioned ideas about women as “tarnished” and “impure” when sexually active.

#### THE PERILS OF CHASTITY

Not only do virginity pledges not work to keep our young people safe, they are causing harm by undermining condom use, contraception and medical treatment.

William Smith, Policy Director at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

In *Talk about Sex* Janice Irvine argues, “Conservatives have used volatile sexual rhetoric—rhetoric that . . . is often misleading and sometimes deceptive—in order to build a movement, capture the terms of public debate, and reshape the sexual culture according to their own vision.”<sup>3</sup> As such, it is important to situate the culture of chastity in the rhetoric of the religious Right, frenzied efforts to push abstinence-only sex education onto the masses, and the severe backlash against comprehensive sex education advocated by the Bush Administration. As Irvine outlines in her review of abstinence-only education, the

consequences of the increased visibility and power of the Right wing have been multiple: From 1988 to 1999 abstinence-only education grew from 2 percent to 23 percent. In 2003 a survey found that 30 percent of sex education instructors taught abstinence and never mentioned information about condoms or other contraceptives. Funding increased for abstinence-only education, from \$10.9 million in 1982 to \$120 million in 2003; further, Bush allocated \$1.5 billion in his 2005 budget for “marriage promotion” projects, mostly aimed at imposing marriage as a solution for poverty. Left-wing groups promoting comprehensive sex education were audited more frequently during his administration, scrutinized more heavily, and sometimes disbanded, while Right-wing groups that promoted abstinence-only education were documented using federal money to (illegally) promote programs that taught scripture and funded prayer vigils at abortion clinics.<sup>4</sup>

Misinformation and distortion of facts also became more of the norm during the Bush Administration. For example, the Centers for Disease Control, at the prompting of Bush Administration regulations, removed information about condom use and efficacy from its Web site in 2002. Funding for research on gay sexuality, sex work, anal sex, and men who sleep with men received increased scrutiny and funding cuts (prompting Representative Henry Waxman to call these cuts “scientific McCarthyism”). Similarly, the National Institutes for Health (NIH) removed from its Web site the widely supported finding that abortions do not increase risk for breast cancer. During the last eight years groups like the Traditional Values Coalition, Concerned Women for America, the American Family Association, and Focus on the Family—all of which, as Irvine points out, oppose gay rights, abortion, and comprehensive sex education, while promoting distorted information about the efficacy of birth control and sex education—gained legislative and policy power during the Bush Administration. Indeed, comprehensive sex education has been labeled “pornographic” and has been said to “promote all kinds of deviant sexuality—bondage and all types of bizarre sexual behavior.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, attacks on comprehensive sex education have focused both on the removal of funding for anything but abstinence-only education and on the promotion of severe distortions about sexual health and well-being, particularly for young women. Within this context the development of the “culture of chastity”—particularly chastity clubs and organizations—makes a particular kind of sense, fueled in part by the cultural suppression of accurate information about sex combined with notions of sex as “dirty” and “contaminating.” Indeed, the powerfully repressive forces on the national stage have severely limited the available discourses about women’s sexuality, making way for chastity culture to gain momentum.

When looking more carefully at the kinds of messages promoted within chastity organizations, the specific gendered distortions become apparent. Both Michelle Fine and Joseph A. Diorio have argued that abstinence-only education programs present adolescent women as victims of sexuality, interested only in penile-vaginal intercourse, and lacking in ability to negotiate sexual subjectivity and desire.<sup>6</sup> Fine has also stated that women learn to construct marriage as a haven from victimization, despite lack of evidence for that paradigm.<sup>7</sup> The chastity organization True Love Waits advocates these points by stating that ministers should say to their female Bible students, “Sex is an incredible gift within the marriage covenant but it destroys the lives of those outside God’s plan.”<sup>8</sup> These kinds of messages—where women are taught that sexuality can only exist within the narrow confines of state-sponsored marriage—contribute to the adoption of a particular worldview that promotes gender essentialism and a sharp divide between the construction of masculinity and femininity. First, ideas about a naturally dichotomous relationship between boys and girls is strongly promoted, whereby sexuality fuses the essential oppositeness of the two genders. Differences between boys and girls are constructed as natural, essential, and lifelong, particularly with regard to the way they approach sexuality. As Deborah Tolman argued, we socialize young women into a framework where they cannot assert their own needs because of their inscribed passivity in early sexual exchanges. She argues, “The possibility that girls might be interested in sexuality in their own right rather than as objects of boys’ desire is met with resistance and discomfort.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, age-old constructions of men as “of the mind” and women as “of the body” are re-created through an insistence on men needing to overcome their bodily desires via their minds, while women should guard their bodies from the invading (masculine) force of sexual desire. Heather Hendershot, in her analysis of chastity, argues:

Although the construction of teenage girls as emotional and weak and boys as hard and strong is hardly unique to fundamentalist media, it dominates such media to an even greater extent than it dominates popular culture in general, and this dominance serves political and spiritual purposes particular to fundamentalism. . . . How can boys still be masculine while resisting their active sexual urges, and how can girls still be feminine while resisting the urge to passively submit?<sup>10</sup>

Here, girls are thought not to want sex, while boys are thought to have an essential sexual appetite that girls must resist. The assumption that teenagers—particularly *boys*—cannot control their sexual appetites permeates the culture

of chastity clubs. Frighteningly, these kinds of attitudes perpetuate the belief that men's sexual needs might overwhelm their otherwise kind and loving minds, leading to sexual violence. As Hendershot states:

By constructing a teen body utterly lacking self-control, a body that can only be controlled/cured by a spiritual commitment to chastity, fundamentalist chastity discourse may inadvertently encourage boys to be sexually violent and girls to see submission to sexual violence as natural. . . . Crudely put, when all bodily control is lost, boys give in to their urge to rape and girls give in to their urge to submit to rape. . . . It sometimes seems that rape per se does not exist for fundamentalists. Instead, boys "lose control" or "force themselves" on girls.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, sexual violence loses its impact as a *violent* act and instead becomes a mere "giving in" to temptation. This kind of gendered worldview encourages boys and girls to forego discussions of *consent* in favor of concepts like control and force. As Cris Mayo argues, adolescent women are portrayed as "abstinent heterosexuals" who must guard against the forceful sexuality of their male peers.<sup>12</sup> Along these lines Wanda Pillow argues that adolescent women must negotiate "discourses of alarm," primarily surrounding the idea of sex as "dirty" and "dangerous," alongside "discourses of heteronormativity," primarily around the reassertion of traditional gender roles and marriage as the solution. She says, "Each of these discourses relies upon 'erotic welfare' logic to reproduce themselves—that is, a proliferation of alarmist discourses in order to control and contain, in this case, female sexuality."<sup>13</sup> Sexual socialization that excludes alarmist models has typically been eliminated from the mainstream sex education curricula.

In addition to the problem of constructing sexual violence as a mere extension of the male urge for sex, chastity organizations also promote the view that girls do not actually want sex, but rather romantic love. True Love Waits argues, "You know that sexual feelings can be powerful. However, the deepest desire of your heart is not sex, but real love. People who feel unloved, lonely, unappreciated, and unvalued will do all kinds of things—often things that are harmful to themselves—to try to fill their need for real love."<sup>14</sup> Sex for girls is portrayed as merely a byproduct of, or an avenue toward, romantic love rather than something that girls strongly desire or find appealing by itself. In this case True Love Waits and other conservative groups mirror the findings of feminist social science research, in that researchers have found that adolescent girls do indeed seek romantic love over sexual pleasure per se. Several adolescent sexuality scholars—including Deborah Tolman and Michelle Fine—found that adolescent women's drive toward romantic love overshadows their

ability to embrace sexual desire; as such, the quest for romantic love forms a central part of their early sexual development.

The various Q&A and self-help sections of the True Love Waits Web site help to further illuminate these points. In one Q&A column that discusses waiting until marriage for sex, a boy writes, "You make guys sound like real jerks, out to get what they can, however they can." Dr. Powell responds, "That's not always true, but it fits for lots of guys. Many males see having sex as a chance to score and that's all, while most girls see it as an expression of love and commitment."<sup>15</sup> Note the gender dichotomization here and the emphasis on romantic love for girls. The boy goes on to say, "But what about when you're out on a date? She looks so good and smells so good and feels so good. Surely you don't mean I can control myself." The counselor later responds:

Wouldn't you agree that the main pressure for the girl comes from her boyfriend? She doesn't want to displease or anger him because she might lose him, and then where would she be? So she says yes, when she really wants to say no. . . . And if she says no, he may think she's only teasing and push himself on her anyway.

Again rape is depicted as a natural consequence of boys' raging hormones, and "pushing oneself" onto a girl a mere consequence of the natural order.

These narratives become all the more complicated when one considers the various messages within the Q&A sections on actual sexual violence. For example, in one of these columns a boy who writes in about his lifelong experience with sexual abuse receives the following advice from Dr. Pat Clendinning: "God loves you and cares for what is happening to you. Pray that He'll get you out of this. Forgive the person who has abused you. Don't hold it against him. And pray."<sup>16</sup> Another woman who writes in about being raped is told by Dr. Wade Rowatt, "The normal attractiveness between men and women that God gave us becomes distorted with sin. Men abuse women not out of love, but out of anger or greed or selfishness. That doesn't please God, and that's not God's intention for the attraction between men and women."<sup>17</sup> Here the lack of distinction between sexual violence and consensual sex is evident, as both abusers are constructed as simply "sinning" and being in need of forgiveness. While sinning may have particular resonance within Evangelical communities that it lacks in more secular communities, these constructions eerily mimic the way that conscious, consensual premarital sex is constructed in the chastity literature, as consenting adults are also constructed as "sinners" who need forgiveness from God. There is no distinction between the "sin" of violence and the "sin" of desire. Further, these columns emphasize the need to forgive men's sexual violence, even when they victimize children. This slippage helps



to remove women's agency in the context of their early sexual experiences by portraying them as receptacles for men's sexual needs, while women's sexual desires go largely unnoticed or unaddressed.

In addition to emphasizing the differences between men and women and implicitly conflating sexual violence with consensual sex, these advice columns also perpetuate vast amounts of false information that suggests that postmarital sex is entirely devoid of danger, negative consequences, and pain. For example, a young woman writes in with the worry that she has contracted AIDS and receives the following advice from Dr. Wayne Grant, M.D.:

The avoidance of AIDS is actually very simple. Teens can be virtually sure that they will not get AIDS if they avoid using drugs and practice a biblically-based sex life. . . . Biblically-based sex means refraining from all forms of sexual intercourse until you are in a committed, faithful marriage relationship with your husband or wife. All partners who are faithful in this way will never become contaminated with the AIDS virus. They can enjoy their sexuality in a mutually enjoyable and exciting way. They will have no need to worry about the consequences of their sexual activities.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of information directly contradicts the fact that many married people engage in extramarital sex (including homoerotic sexual acts), which can lead to the contraction of AIDS and other STDs. Also, many people who enter marriages have already contracted STDs prior to marriage, even if they have not had vaginal intercourse.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous problems that results from the promotion of this highly gendered worldview based on gender dichotomization, fear-mongering about the sexual problems of unmarried people, and the conflation of sexual violence and consensual sex is the distortion in the intended message that arises about the *actual danger* of unprotected sexual interactions (not to mention the distortions in how teens respond to these messages). For example, a recent study on teenage sexual behavior found that adolescents who had taken a virginity pledge were much less likely than nonpledgers to use contraception, and when they did use contraception, it was inconsistent and often misused. Further, those who took virginity pledges were significantly more likely than nonpledgers to engage in sexual relationships with older partners.<sup>19</sup> Those who pledged chastity often had little access to comprehensive sexual education and were thus unprepared when the opportunity for sexual interaction occurred. This fact, compounded by the presence of an older partner who may feel more sexually mature or more ready for sexual contact, can prove especially difficult for teens who pledge chastity.

To make matters worse, several studies have shown that virginity pledges can prove detrimental to teens' health and may actually place them at *higher risk* of unintended pregnancy and STDs. Studies show that teens who break their pledges are one-third less likely than nonpledgers to use contraceptives once they do become sexually active, in part because they are less likely to be prepared for an experience they have promised to avoid.<sup>20</sup> Compounded with fears of pregnancy (something Wanda Pillow situates within the highly racialized context of the unwed teen mother as a "social problem") and silence about sexuality, those who take chastity pledges may have few social supports to deal with the consequences of unprotected sex.<sup>21</sup>

Some studies have revealed positive results of chastity pledges, but these studies typically emphasize the limits of what chastity pledges can accomplish. While studies show that chastity pledges may delay the first vaginal intercourse experience by up to eighteen months, these findings also point out that chastity pledges only had an effect on girls (primarily white) ages fifteen to seventeen and had no effect on older teens. Virginity pledges were also found only to work in those school contexts in which the pledge constitutes minority group behavior; as the number of pledges rises, the effectiveness of pledging decreases.<sup>22</sup> In short, "students are attracted to virginity pledges precisely because they can offer them a shared group identity that sets them apart from their peers—a counterculture of sorts—that loses its allure once it becomes normative."<sup>23</sup> Thus, if more adolescents were to pledge chastity, the pledge would become increasingly meaningless and thus cannot work as a universal strategy.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of sexual responsibility (i.e., reduced pregnancy rates, reduced STD rates, delayed first intercourse, etc.), studies show that the most significant predictors of teenage girls' sexual responsibility include comprehensive sexual education, a positive and loving relationship between the teenager and her mother—particularly if the mother recommends specific methods of birth control and does not strongly disapprove of sex—and effective parent-child communication.<sup>25</sup> Most teenagers who pledge chastity have not had comprehensive sexual education and report that they do not discuss birth control with their mothers. Research shows that maternal disapproval of sex leads to a slight delay in first intercourse but also decreases the likelihood of using contraception when the teen becomes sexually active. Thus, chastity pledges can have dangerous consequences for teen health.<sup>26</sup>

An even more disturbing consequence of chastity pledges involves the way that teens construct the definition of sex. Studies show that those who take chastity pledges and join chastity clubs most often endorse only the most literal definition of "sex" as "vaginal intercourse," or penetration of a vagina by

a penis. Thus, a disproportionately high number of teens who pledge chastity engage in forms of sex like anal sex and fellatio because they believe that these sexual acts do not count as sex. A recent study reports that 13 percent of chastity pledgers versus 2 percent of nonpledgers engaged in anal or oral sex. One study found that “among virgins, boys who had pledged abstinence were four times as likely to have engaged in anal sex as those who did not pledge, and pledgers overall were six times as likely to have engaged in oral sex as teens who were virgins but did not take a pledge. . . . In addition, teens who made virginity pledges were less likely to use condoms during their first sexual experience and were less likely to get tested for STDs.”<sup>27</sup> Many teen pledgers reported that anal and oral sex did not constitute a way to lose virginity, but rather, left their virginity “intact.” These attitudes, combined with the fact that they tend to be less educated about contraception and less likely to use contraception, have dangerous consequences for their sexual health. Teen chastity pledgers are more likely to contract anal and oral STDs while still proclaiming their virginity. As Peter Bearman and Hannah Bruckman argue:

The sad story is that kids who are trying to preserve their technical virginity are, in some cases, engaging in much riskier behavior. . . . From a public health point of view, an abstinence movement that encourages no vaginal sex may inadvertently encourage other forms of alternative sex that are at higher risk of STDs.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the culture of chastity operates on two (competing) levels: first, it offers teenage women a social space where they can communicate about shared values and work together toward common goals. By working to generate purity as a collective agreement, they may, as some girls’ studies scholars have noted (Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Janie Victoria Ward, Beth Cooper Benjamin), forge communities that value the *privacy* of girls’ space, which contradicts the patriarchal value system of intrusion and access to women in all spheres.<sup>29</sup> Any space that women construct around *denial of access* to men may function as a subversion of dominant cultural norms and, as such, should be taken seriously as having the potential to generate productive identities. That said, the second interpretation of the culture of chastity posits that, because the community is constructed around women lacking the ability to *choose desire for sex*, it may reinforce the very patriarchal values that the women-only private space subverts. Still more, the culture of chastity clubs clearly promotes a kind of reckless disregard for sexual health, particularly in the areas of contraceptive use, sexual education, and the substitution of oral and anal sex for vaginal intercourse. The less subversive interpretation of chastity clubs posits that chastity clubs promote a highly gendered worldview where men and women

are seen as essentially different, where sexual violence and consensual sex are not wholly differentiated, and where girls lose their sexual agency as they embrace their role as a passive sexual receptacle for men's active desires. Thus, while a certain amount of agency is implied in the *creation* of the communities of chastity, the project itself remains tainted by essentialism and promotion of sexual difference and dominance.

#### CHASTITY AND THE IVY LEAGUE

The increased prevalence of chastity clubs on Ivy League campuses challenges many common stereotypes about chastity as something promoted primarily in sheltered, nondiverse, lower-income, or less educated circles. Here we see the convergence of academic elitism with the principles of hard-line conservative and patriarchal constructions of sexuality. In recent years the number of chastity clubs on Ivy League campuses has grown significantly. Of the eight Ivy League schools three have chastity clubs that actively recruit members on campus, and nearly all of them have religious organizations in which chastity is a primary focus. Of these the clubs at Harvard, Princeton, and Brown are the most active and visible, and as such, each of these clubs will be carefully considered.

Chastity clubs organized in young adulthood carry different implications than those forged during early adolescence, as young adults can assert more agency and autonomy surrounding abstinence from sex. As the culture of universities often promotes sexual activity (while norms for younger women promote *no* sexual activity), women's choices to organize around abstinence implies a kind of resistance to social norms rather than hyperconformity to those norms. That said, Ivy League chastity clubs are plagued with the same kinds of misinformation, gender essentialism, and conflation of consent and force as found in the clubs targeting younger women.

The notable variation in the language used to recruit young women to chastity clubs represents the tension among religious discourse, science, and morality, broadly speaking. While chastity clubs that seek to recruit younger women (ages seven to fifteen) often use religion and obedience as the primary (or even sole) justification for chastity, chastity clubs aiming to recruit older women employ techniques that appeal to their desire to avoid a variety of negative social consequences. While nearly all chastity clubs include language of fear and intimidation about sexuality, portraying sex as universally bad and unwanted in their recruitment materials, Ivy League chastity clubs rely more heavily on specifically identifying the negative consequences of premarital sex. Much of the information presented on their Web sites includes false statements about sexual health (e.g., stating that condoms are unreliable and do

not protect against STDs). In the Frequently Asked Questions section of its Web site, Harvard's chastity club, True Love Revolution, argues:

Saving sex for marriage can help your current relationships since it shows commitment, builds trust, and fosters respect. Sex outside of marriage often blurs the distinction between infatuation and lasting love, resulting in feelings of *loss, pain and betrayal after breakups*. Abstinence enables couples to develop a strong personal relationship that is centered on the whole person, which promotes better communication between partners. People who abstain from sexual activity do not have to worry about *STIs, unplanned pregnancies, or the possibility that their partner is "just in it for the sex."* Saving sex for marriage lowers your chances of *divorce and marital infidelity* while enabling better sex in your future marriage, free from *regrets and unwanted memories* of past sexual experiences.<sup>30</sup>

Note here the way that sexual activity is linked to loss, pain, betrayal, divorce, marital infidelity, regret, painful memories, diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and disrespect. In fact, much research shows that, with comprehensive sexual education and communication between partners, adolescent sexual experiences can be positive, affirming, and joyous experiences and that adolescent sexuality is a normal and evolutionarily significant process.<sup>31</sup>

The column goes on to argue that abstinence is the *only* way to avoid serious sexually transmitted infections like herpes, HIV, and HPV and, like many advocates of abstinence-only doctrines, falsely asserts that "condoms work best (though still imperfectly) against HIV, but they are *almost completely ineffective against HPV* (Human Papillomavirus), which is the new epidemic STI among young adults."<sup>32</sup> In fact, the promotion of the belief that condoms are ineffective, frequently and consistently break, and are difficult to use is often promoted among those who seek to recruit young women to the abstinence cause. According to government-sponsored studies conducted by the National Institutes for Health, "recent studies conducted in the U.S. show condom breakage rates during use to be in the range of 0.4% to 2.3% with comparable rates for slippage. Use factors such as experience, condom size, and use of lubricant can affect condom slippage and breakage."<sup>33</sup> Further, studies sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that condoms are 98 percent effective in preventing pregnancy and that they are highly effective in protecting against all STDs, including HPV, HIV, and other STIs.<sup>34</sup> To suggest that condoms are ineffective, break frequently, and do not protect against HPV and other STI infections is false and misleading.

The column mimics the True Love Waits Web site and embraces more false statements when it argues, "Saving sex for marriage with a single partner who

is trustworthy and disease-free is the only way to avoid serious risks of contracting a variety of dangerous diseases.”<sup>35</sup> Not only is such a statement blatantly false in asserting that marriage is a requirement for monogamy or exclusivity, as we know that many couples maintain monogamous and exclusive relationships without being legally married, but it also assumes that marriage will *protect* against dangerous diseases. In fact, many married individuals report infidelity, including men who engage in high-risk sexual behaviors like unprotected same-sex intercourse with other men. These kinds of assertions not only promote frankly false information but also serve to idealize the context of marriage as one free of danger, betrayal, unwanted pregnancies, and diseases.

Similar themes of fear, intimidation, and the construction of marriage as the only legitimate way to ensure sexual health and happiness emerge from Princeton’s Anscombe Society chastity club.<sup>36</sup> Its mission statement argues:

The Anscombe Society is a student organization dedicated to affirming the importance of the family, marriage, and a *proper* understanding for the role of sex and sexuality. We aim to promote an environment that values the crucial role the *intact, stable family* plays in sustaining society; the definition of marriage as the *exclusive, monogamous union of a man and a woman*; its role as an institution which is *necessary for the healthy family*, and thus for a healthy society; a conception of feminism that encourages motherhood; and a *chaste lifestyle which respects and appreciates human sexuality*, relationships, and dignity. Therefore, we celebrate sex as unifying, beautiful, and joyful when shared in its *proper context*: that of *marriage between a man and woman*.<sup>37</sup>

Notably, this mission statement not only endorses homophobia by prescribing heterosexuality as the only means to fulfillment of any kind but relies upon outdated constructions of intact (versus broken?) families and the “proper context” of postmarital sexuality. Ironically, while the club’s literature argues for a “chaste lifestyle which respects and appreciates human sexuality,” the diversity of human sexual experiences is completely erased from this formulation, replaced by a narrow and strict definition of heterosexual, *reproductive*, procreative, marital sexuality.

The assertion that marriage is *necessary* for a healthy family and a healthy society also promotes the false idea that stable family units cannot exist outside of the nuclear family. Indeed, a 2005 report shows that roughly one-quarter of households in the United States can be described as consisting of nuclear families (mother, father, and one or more children), making the nuclear family the third most common household arrangement in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Further, studies show that, when controlling for socioeconomic status, chil-

dren who live in other family arrangements—whether single-parent families, families with unmarried parents, gay and lesbian families, multigenerational families, adopted families, and so on—show similar physical and mental health outcomes, achievement outcomes, and school success.<sup>39</sup> Also, in a study of over five thousand partnerships it was shown that long-term cohabitating couples report similar outcomes with regard to frequency of conflict, perceptions of equity, relationship satisfaction, and quality of relationship.<sup>40</sup> The researchers go on to say, “If the rewards of cohabitation are similar to those of marriage, but the costs are fewer, then we may expect cohabitation to challenge marriage as the ultimate method of coupling.”<sup>41</sup>

In its position statement Princeton’s Anscombe Society relies upon false information to promote homophobic and antidivorce rhetoric:

We believe that marriage is a social as well as personal good, contributing to the health and happiness of both spouses and their children. Scientific evidence from a variety of fields as well as human experience have shown that *any deviation from this norm is harmful*, even if sometimes unpreventable—as in the case of death. It is still more harmful when this variation challenges the institution of marriage itself, as in the cases of *same-sex unions and casual divorce*.<sup>42</sup>

Again, to argue that *any variation* from heterosexual, procreative marriage is harmful represents a gross disregard for the last several decades of social science research, which consistently finds that nonnuclear families nurture and support children in similar ways to traditional families. Further, issues of socioeconomic class—something that has repeatedly been shown to affect children’s well-being—are ignored and obscured behind homophobic and sexist rhetoric. Research repeatedly shows that drops in socioeconomic status following divorce or disintegration of the “nuclear family” cause negative outcomes far more often than the absence of one parent. In fact, families that maintain their socioeconomic class status consistently show positive outcomes for children. Further, research shows that gay and lesbian families do not differ from heterosexual families in their ability to provide positive environments for children.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to blatantly homophobic rhetoric these chastity clubs also fail to acknowledge the fact that many nonmarried couples experience intimacy, connectedness, and sexual unity. Princeton’s Anscombe Society argues:

The Anscombe Society believes that sex, when properly understood and experienced, is unifying, beautiful, and joyful, and that it serves several purposes, providing a couple *intimacy, unity, pleasure, and the chance for procreation*. All of these purposes, however, can be fully realized only



within the context of marriage. If experienced outside of this proper setting, we believe that sex loses its value, proving harmful to both the parties involved and to their relationship. . . . Sex is thus the actualization of the marital union, concretizing the mutual gift of self between the partners. If experienced outside the context of marriage, therefore, it cannot actualize the union, for no union exists. . . . Outside of the context of marriage, then, sex ultimately reduces the participants to mere instruments serving an incomplete end—be it the desire for emotional intimacy, physical pleasure, or personal security. . . . To use sex for pleasure or emotional fulfillment alone not only fails to realize the essential purpose of sex, but degrades the inherent dignity of the human being to that of an object—a means to an end.<sup>44</sup>

Here intimacy, unity, pleasure, and procreation are constructed as solely occurring within the realm of married heterosexual couples. Further, the column argues that unmarried couples who engage in sex degrade themselves due to the lack of propriety. Such assertions not only stand in direct contrast to what we know to be true of modern relationship couplings but also promote the false idea that the meaning of sexuality can be territorialized, reduced, and claimed only for procreative heterosexual couples.<sup>45</sup>

The portrayal of men and women as essentially different also appears in Ivy League chastity club discourse. Princeton's Anscombe Society argues, "There are inherent physical, behavioral, emotional, and psychological differences between men and women, and we affirm and celebrate these differences as wonderful and complementary."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Dennis Helming, in a talk sponsored by Columbia University's Augustine Club, argued:

Chastity comes much harder to men than to women. It's no secret that the undisciplined male sex drive is monotonously predictable and frivolous. For men from 13 to 93 years of age, nothing ever seems to change, except perhaps the specific source of gratifying friction. Man's arousal is so physical, indiscriminate, effortless, supersonic and imperious. For men, release from sexual tension comes across as psychologically peripheral, largely phenomenal: no big deal. Left to their wanton ways, most men find sex one big, obsessive game with few or no ulterior motives or meanings.<sup>47</sup>

Central to the argument that chastity leads to a "pure life" lie these assertions that emphasize men and women's essentially different natures, forcing a worldview where men and women cannot mutually desire sex because they fundamentally lack the same inherent way of approaching sexuality.

Collectively, not only do these Ivy League chastity clubs affirm the connec-



tions between academic elitism and hard-line conservative, Fundamentalist doctrines, but they also reveal the ways that chastity clubs seeking older women (ages eighteen to twenty-two) differ from clubs recruiting high school-aged girls. While some of the strategies are similar—particularly an emphasis on fear of sex and the dangers of premarital sex, as well as a sharp divide between men and women as essentially different—the Ivy League clubs more actively promote false sexual health information, acute homophobia, and—at least implicitly—their members’ differentness from other college students. Central to the Ivy League recruitment strategies are messages about resisting the temptation to behave like other (hormonal, animalistic?) college students by embracing a more pure, dignified, and religious lifestyle. The key difference between these clubs and clubs aimed at younger women is the social norm that the clubs reference: for the Ivy League clubs the norm of sexual exploration and desire must be subverted via sexual restraint, whereas for younger women desire has apparently not yet formed, so the norm of restraint becomes the singular story. The presence of these clubs on Ivy League campuses also testifies to the increasing power of abstinence-only discourse and religious traditionalism as it impacts the sexual choices of older teenagers and young adults who are slated to become the nation’s elite.

#### PURITY BALLS

How can you measure the value of your eleven year old looking up into your eyes (as you clumsily learn the fox-trot together) with innocent, uncontainable joy, saying, “Daddy, I’m so excited!” . . . It is impossible to convey what I have seen in their sweet spirits, their delicate, forming souls, as their daddy takes them out for their first, big dance. Their whole being absorbs my loving attention, resulting in a radiant sense of self-worth and identity. Think of it from their perspective: My daddy thinks I’m beautiful in my own unique way. My daddy is treating me with respect and honor. . . . My daddy really loves me!

Wesley Tullis, quoted in Randy Wilson, “Generations of Light”

My father pledged to protect me and promised to lead a life of integrity and purity for me. He signed his name and I signed as a witness to his words. And as he escorted me to the dance floor I felt empowered by his promise to spend the rest of his life warring for my heart through his life of purity. And I knew my life would never be the same.

Young girl, quoted in Randy Wilson, “Generations of Light”

My kids are on loan to me for a season; it’s important how I use that time.

Ken Lane, quoted in Nancy Gibbs, “The Pursuit of Purity”

In February 2007 Jennifer Baumgardner wrote an article on purity balls that appeared in *Glamour* magazine, giving national media attention to the relatively new phenomenon of purity balls. Framed as an extension, or a more extreme version, of chastity pledges, purity balls make literal the chastity pledge by encouraging daughters to pledge chastity to their fathers until marriage. Baumgardner writes:

Dozens of these lavish events are held every year, mainly in the South and Midwest, from Tucson to Peoria and New Orleans, sponsored by churches, nonprofit groups and crisis pregnancy centers. The balls are all part of the evangelical Christian movement, and they embody one of its key doctrines: abstinence until marriage. . . . The young women who sign covenants at these parties tend to be devout, homeschooled and sheltered from popular culture.<sup>48</sup>

Typically, these events include dinner, dancing, a keynote speaker (e.g., Miss Arizona spoke at the 2007 Chandler, Arizona, purity ball), and ritualized chastity pledge signings. After daughters sign their chastity pledge documents, or otherwise silently commit to chastity via a ritual of laying a white rose on a cross, each father signs another document as a witness and guardian who promises to help his daughter “honor God with her body.”<sup>49</sup> One widely used version of “the pledge” for fathers reads:

I, (daughter’s name)’s father, choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity. I will be pure in my own life as a man, husband and father. I will be a man of integrity and accountability as I lead, guide and pray over my daughter and my family as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come.<sup>50</sup>

The purposes of these chastity balls are consistent in their assertion that fathers can and should guard their daughters’ chastity as their own property. The New Life Pregnancy Center, which sponsors purity balls throughout Arizona, describes the purpose of purity balls:

The purpose and vision of this event is for young women to realize how precious they are—that they are very much worth waiting for. With today’s peer pressure, high teen pregnancy rates, absent parent figures, cohabitation and epidemic levels of sexually transmitted diseases it is vital for us to protect our daughters from unhealthy relationships and offer them hope, love and security. A large portion of this hope, love and security is essential to come from their fathers. When that is missing, young

women desperately seek to fill that emptiness in all the wrong places. In this generation we are seeing missing or uninvolved parents as one of the key causes of delinquency and promiscuity. The Purity Ball gives not only *daughters* an opportunity to gain more insight on the importance of remaining abstinent until marriage but it also challenges *fathers* to pledge to purity and godliness in their lives as they are a living example of what daughters will look for in a future mate.<sup>51</sup>

Notably, such descriptions conflate largely unrelated social phenomena such as cohabitation and STD contraction rates, a trend observed throughout much of the chastity literature. No studies show that cohabitating couples are inherently more likely to contract STDs. Here “delinquency and promiscuity” are also once again linked, representing the way in which consensual sexuality and criminal behavior are woven together within this discourse. This description also portrays daughters as needing protection (sons, clearly, do not require such parental intervention), while portraying premarital sex as a function only of “emptiness” and insecurity.

The increasing prevalence of purity balls as a way to publicly declare one’s chastity brings up a variety of gendered messages. Several critics, including Eve Ensler and Carol Gilligan, argue that purity balls inscribe women as property of their fathers while sacrificing women’s independence and setting them up for failure. Ensler argues, “When you sign a pledge to your father to preserve your virginity, your sexuality is basically being taken away from you until you sign yet another contract, a marital one. . . . It makes you feel like you’re the least important person in the whole equation. It makes you feel invisible.” Gilligan adds, “In patriarchy, a father owns a girl’s sexuality. . . . And like any other property, he guards it, protects it, and even loves it.”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, purity balls enter women into a system of commerce in which their sexuality becomes an object to be traded by and between men. One of the young women interviewed for a *Time* piece in 2008 commented, “I’m very much at peace about this. I don’t feel like I need to seek a man. I will be found.”<sup>53</sup> The notable language of passivity speaks to a gender divide in the experience of chastity culture. While on the surface these balls claim to honor purity as a way of honoring God, the blatant gender dichotomization between sons and daughters speaks more to the gendered qualities of the events. While sons’ purity need not require such parental control or protection, daughters’ purity demands extensive watchdog efforts to restrict, restrain, and contain it.

The romantic, and even sexual, implications of the event are also difficult to ignore. These events function to romanticize and make public the act of declaring chastity *to* one’s father and *to* God. Nearly all descriptions of these events include a variety of weddinglike references, including elaborate flowers,

expensive dresses that are typically white, tiaras, limousines, dinner/dancing combinations, toasts from the father, wedding cake, and an almost universal exclusion of mothers from the process. Some events include swords used by fathers to pass over the shoulders of the daughters, hearkening back to a medieval model of purity and “honor.” Baumgardner describes one purity ball in which pledgers cried during the ceremony, and the DJ played songs like “I’ll Always Be Your Baby” and “Have I Told You Lately?” The line between father/daughter sentimentality and downright reenactments of romantic love is difficult to fully discern.

There is strong irony in the fact that the event centers on sexuality, yet never mentions sexuality directly; girls use the word “purity” nearly exclusively, and often do not know how to describe its meaning. Baumgardner reports, “When I ask Hannah Smith, 15, what purity means to her, she answers, ‘I actually don’t know.’ Her older sister Emily jumps in: ‘Purity, it means . . . I don’t know how to explain it. It is important to us that we promise to ourselves and to our fathers and to God that we promise to stay pure until . . . It is hard to explain.’”<sup>54</sup> She argues that the girls’ lack of sexual vocabulary regarding the meaning of purity results from “a universal truth of girlhood: You don’t want to talk about sex with anyone older than 18, *particularly* your dad.”<sup>55</sup> Yet the event seems to *maintain* these women’s lack of vocabulary, to keep them in the dark about the complexities of sexuality and desire such that they cannot and will not discuss it as they blossom into adults. Fathers encourage their daughters to sign chastity pledges as a way to construct them as eternally naive, adolescent, and unable to make informed choices. This fits well with the general resistance these communities have toward comprehensive sex education, condom distribution, the HPV vaccine, and the like. The central idea, however ironic, persists: if girls do not know about sexuality, they will pledge chastity; once they pledge chastity, they pledge also to resist formal sexual education.

The problematic elements of the word “purity” also connect to a variety of patriarchal beliefs about women and their bodies. Tomi-Ann Roberts argues, “Purity as a word—that has to do with whether your water is contaminated or not. . . . I don’t like it being described for a human being. Why is it called a purity ball? Why isn’t it called the respect-my-daughter ball? We never talk about men’s purity. Girls and women have suffered enough in terms of negative perceptions of their sexuality.”<sup>56</sup> The concept of purity as freedom from that which contaminates or debases (the commonly held definition) situates sexuality as dirty, sinful, and potentially polluting—*for women*. This definition encourages women to construct sex not as a normal part of human existence, but as something that fundamentally corrupts them and as something that brings forth disease and contamination. Not only does this language hinder

women's ability to construct sexuality in more complicated ways, but it also strengthens gender dichotomization, as men do not become similarly contaminated, polluted, and damaged when having sex. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, argues, "For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles."<sup>57</sup> As such, because women have long been constructed as "of the body" and therefore of lower status, more dirty, and less rational, the construction of them as sexually polluted takes on particular significance in relation to this cultural history. It is not coincidental or accidental that we have a cultural interest in women's purity while neglecting to care about men's purity.

In addition to the romantic overtones of purity balls, psychoanalytic implications also become evident through the father/daughter "date," the transfer of ownership of a woman's sexuality to her father, and the exclusion and virtual nonimportance of the mother during these events. Purity balls inscribe fathers both as the vehicle through which young women channel and suppress their sexual urges and also as authority figures that dampen young men's out-of-control desires that may be directed toward their daughters. In turn fathers serve as the *literal* gatekeepers for access to their daughter's sexualities. Some purity balls actually encourage daughters to give a small key to their fathers so that their fathers can serve as owner of their sexuality until they marry someone else later in life. This act marks the father as the woman's current sexual partner much in the way that a nun's vow of chastity marks her as the sexual partner of Jesus. In addition to frankly sexualizing the daughter in the eyes of the father, it marks the future husband as requiring permission to "obtain the key" from the father in order to have sex with the daughter.

The absence of mothers in these ceremonies represents the deep-seated patriarchal and psychoanalytic implications of the father's responsibility for protecting and guarding her chastity. Much effort is made to reinforce the phallic power of the father and to strip the mother of her mentoring capacity. In fact, some purity ball organizations encourage pastors or even athletic coaches to protect young women's purity while failing to see mothers in this role. For example, the Christian Center Web site states, "For those girls who have no father, we ask that a mentor escort her instead. This could be a grandfather, a family friend, an uncle, a pastor, or someone else who can serve as a godly male role model."<sup>58</sup> If, in fact, these organizations construct fathers as the "high priest" of the family, then the implication is that he has (sexual) control not only over his daughter but also over his wife, again reinforcing the idea that women and their sexualities are forms of property rather than autonomous entities.

The *language* of purity balls also reflects deep-seated psychoanalytic impli-

cations. Daughters often describe these events as “going on a date” with their fathers. For example, Scottsdale, Arizona, mother Mona McDonald said that a purity ball “gives them a chance to get together and get all dressed up fancy and the dads teach their daughters what a date should be like.”<sup>59</sup> This language implies that women not only “date” their fathers but learn *how to date* by going out with their fathers. The sexualization of the father/daughter relationship sits prominently within this language. Heather Hendershot notes that “boys and girls are encouraged to ‘date’ their parents and to imagine real dates as siblings. . . . ‘Here’s a quarter. Call my dad. Tell him what you want to do. If it’s all right with him, it’s okay with me.’”<sup>60</sup> The assumption that women will marry men like their fathers is more than cliché here; the women *will first marry their fathers* and will then marry their spouse. Not only must the future husband earn the father’s approval, but he must mimic the father in order to earn the daughter’s love. The sexual implications of such a paradigm are overwhelming, as the father stands in for the lover while teaching the daughter how to interact with and romanticize that same lover. Fathers become not only guardians of their daughter’s sexuality but also substitutes for the daughters’ sexual/romantic object choices.

In the testimonials section of purity ball Web sites some daughters gush about their experiences in hopes of recruiting more young women to future purity ball events. Bethany 2006 says, “It was so grand and uplifting. The music brought tears to my eyes, and the message couldn’t be more spectacular.” Meredith 2006 says, “I feel like I had never been closer to my father.” Jarvis 2005 adds, “I loved hearing my dad make a commitment to me to be an example of purity and to pray for me.”<sup>61</sup> Interviewed at the Colorado Springs, Colorado, purity ball, Lauren Wilson states, “You feel like a princess getting to dress up and knowing the person you’re dancing with loves you so much. I want to feel beautiful to him more than anyone else in my life.” A fellow attendee, Jessica McLintock, adds, “He’s the man in my life right now and it’s going to be a real fun experience.”<sup>62</sup> If we substitute references to fathers and instead insert “husband” or “lover,” the implications for the way purity balls sexualize the father/daughter relationship become apparent.

Most importantly, purity balls strip women of their sexual agency by reinforcing the idea that patriarchal control of women’s sexuality is not only acceptable but desirable. In addition to removing the potentially subversive elements of privacy and girls-only spaces inherent to girls’ chastity clubs, purity balls put girls’ sexuality on display even while denying that same sexuality. These events promote a variety of mixed messages, as the event focuses on sex but never mentions sex, as fathers consciously substitute themselves for their daughter’s romantic object choices even before the daughters fully understand

sexuality, and as mothers are rendered absent and useless despite their well-known role in modulating their daughter's sexual choices. When we condone the treatment of women as sexual property, we also condone the most literal terms of patriarchal culture, where the "law of the father" reigns even at the expense of the daughter's sexual health and sexual agency.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the culture of chastity—particularly the expansion of chastity clubs throughout the United States—promotes a highly gendered social space that normalizes the control of women's bodies and women's sexuality through a variety of means: family, school, religion, and media messages. The hazards of such social spaces include not only literal damage to women's sexual health, in that pledgers report increased unprotected anal and oral sex rates, decreased likelihood of using contraception, increased pregnancy rates, and less parent-child communication about sex, but also discursive damage to the way women construct their sexuality. When women learn to see themselves as essentially different from men, and therefore define their role as "not giving into" sex, this normalizes sexual violence, removes their sexual agency, and contributes to a view of women as vehicles allowing men to express their sexual desire. Further, as shown with the development of chastity balls, the culture of chastity encourages women to construct themselves as sexual property, becoming, in the most literal sense, the sexual property of their fathers and their husbands.

That said, the appeal of chastity clubs for women highlights the social appeal of joining a group that has shared values. For teenage women the idea of emphasizing one's differentness—in this case by celebrating marriage and rejecting one's bodily desires—holds special meaning. This raises several questions about the meaning of women's clubs during the teenage years: Can we construct a way for young fundamentalist women to come together around their differentness without necessarily requiring literal pledges of chastity and abstinence? Can we support the impulse of valuing formal unions or waiting to have sex while still helping to prepare young women for their sexual adulthoods? Can we capitalize on women's assertion of *agency* in the sexual decision-making process *without* relying upon patriarchal constructions of limiting sexual desire as the means to liberation? Forming a club that promotes lack of sexual education and false information about sexual health has dangerous consequences, particularly for women.

Yet there may be some potential for subversion of gender norms in *any* social space that values the denial of men's access to women. Assertions of



privacy, separateness, and differentness do not necessarily contraindicate a feminist politics, yet the mechanism through which women assert these characteristics remains suspect. Thus, while the clubs themselves may allow for spaces that encourage dialogue among women and assertions of shared goals, the public declarations of chastity—particularly when girls “marry” their fathers—serve more to strip women of their sexual agency and construct them as property of men in the most patriarchal sense. This seems particularly true for girls who have not yet reached an age where a nuanced discussion or analysis of sexuality has become possible; the imposition of fatherly “ownership” of girls’ sexuality seems particularly damaging in this light.

Collectively, these problems force us to reconsider the consequences of our abstinence-only, religious fundamentalist, anti-sex-education culture. What does it mean when abstinence-only education increases teenage girls’ risk for STDs? What are the consequences of making literal the exchange of women by and between men? What do the social spaces that restrict women’s sexual desire offer to teenage girls? How can we work to lessen the damage of these repressive discourses while still honoring the religious context of these restrictions? How can we nurture girls’ sexual agency while also communicating hesitancy about the implications of purity culture? Can we envision a way to construct a nonthreatening teenage sexuality?

Part of this vision, it would seem, would allow for a more complicated understanding of gender apart from a dichotomous and essentialist worldview. If we can encourage women and men to construct themselves in more complicated ways, it will be more difficult to embrace “oppositeness” as the way they relate. Further, by reimagining the social relationship between fathers and daughters, perhaps we can work toward providing children with more sexual autonomy while also nurturing more egalitarian relationships between parents themselves. And if the impulse to form social relationships in the context of women’s clubs is important, let us encourage a wider variety of those clubs, particularly those that encourage women to engage in dialogue around issues of sexuality. Indeed, there is a surprising dearth of groups focused on sexuality in the context of women-only spaces; it seems that sexually active teens and young adults most often form cross-gender groups. While this cross-gender arrangement may help to lessen gender essentialism and promote healthy communication between women and men, the unique qualities of women-only spaces embraced by some chastity pledgers is obscured. Perhaps left-leaning sexuality organizations could benefit from more discussion surrounding *sexual access* and the feminist implications of women providing (or denying) men sexual access to their bodies. Similarly, chastity clubs could certainly benefit from the injection of discussing the role of active female



sexual desire and decision-making in the development of women's healthy sexualities. Violence, coercion, and the importance of mutual sexual choices constitute urgent topics; consciousness-raising around these concerns could benefit the sexual health and well-being of all teens, particularly within fundamentalist and traditionalist communities.

If we care about the contributions of social science to the practice of sexual socialization, we must acknowledge the ways in which repression, silence, distorted information, and the construction of women as sexual property negatively affect children as they become adults. Given the assaults we have seen on comprehensive sexual education, concerted efforts to disseminate accurate information about sexual health should be seen as nothing less than life-saving. As long as we continue to allow gross misinformation to spread—particularly about the “safety” of marriage and the “danger” of women's sexual desire—we do a great disservice to the ongoing project of sexual freedom.

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