

Gagged and Bound: Sex Education, Secondary Virginity, and the Welfare Reform Act

Cris Mayo

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

"I want to be different from other girls. I want a guy to look at me in another way.... I see girls getting into trouble, and I don't want to get hurt. I *want* to be a virgin." — Betsy¹

"The girls who laughed at me in high school because I was a virgin...are now working at a Kmart counter.... When people say to me, 'You've missed something,' I say, 'Yeah, I missed worrying about being pregnant and getting some STD and...dying of AIDS.'"²

In this essay, I first look at welfare reform and the history of federally funded abstinence education to reveal how they oppose normative sex and responsibility with representations of single, black, teenage mothers and irresponsibility, and how policies use this dualism to undergird sex education. Then, I examine contradictions in the curricula which emphasize personal choice and responsibility over an examination of social factors encouraging teen pregnancy, some of which are policy-generated themselves. Finally, I look at related social dynamics that lead girls to view sexuality negatively and that encourage them to embrace secondary virginity.

In 1994, according to *Newsweek*, virginity came back in vogue, no longer taught "with a yawn and a wink," even having the support of President Clinton, whose \$400 million campaign against teenage pregnancy turned "virginity into a matter of public health, not just private morality."³ This was one short year after Focus on the Family's "1993 Year in Review" reported that Clinton had "gutted the...tiny amount of money for the teaching of abstinence. The funds were diverted into 'safe-sex' programs promoting condom usage."⁴ First of all, that "tiny" amount of money in support of abstinence education was, in 1991, \$5.2 million; estimates for 1992, \$7.7 million; for 1993, \$9 million.⁵ Surgeon General Elders's brief attempt at steering the federal government's sponsorship of sex education into an emphasis on safer sex led to her removal from office. Within a few short years, abstinence education became a centerpiece in the war against welfare, as provisions for abstinence education were folded into the gentle-sounding "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," eventually amended to provide over \$19 million for abstinence education (\$5 million more than Clinton had requested).⁶

Within this tangle of policy decisions are moments open to philosophical analysis — What is the version of sexuality expressed through this welfare reform policy? How is something called education used to shape sexuality in particular ways? What problematic messages about race, class, and gender are folded into those messages? Virginity, for young girls like the above-quoted Betsy, is a way out of the stresses and risks of heterosexual relationships, particularly in an era where parental notification laws make abortion less accessible to young women. But her strategy necessitates avoiding sex because sex leads to the consequences of disrespect from boys, trouble, and getting hurt. Betsy's definition of sexual activity lacks birth control or protection from HIV, and seems to derogate female sexuality. For

Lakita Garth, the next woman quoted, the consequences of sexual activity result in a drop in class status. Sexual activity leads to “working at Kmart,” again a consequence that covers over the possibility of sexual activity that does not lead to unintended pregnancy. For Focus on the Family, virginity is an embattled concept in an increasingly non-traditional world. And apparently, for Republicans and Democrats alike, virginity/abstinence is one of the keys to successful welfare reform. The welfare reform act included a substantial provision for federal funds to support abstinence education “with a focus on those groups which are most likely to bear children out of wedlock.”⁷ Included in drafts of the act are an array of statistics pointing to the link between single motherhood and poverty, the rising rate of illegitimacy among black Americans, rates of black male criminal activity among young men raised by single mothers, and the rate of criminal activity in neighborhoods with a greater incidence of single parent households.⁸ Rather than focusing concern on the relationship between poverty *per se* and criminal activity, these statements link single motherhood, and also female sexual activity, with criminality and social decay.

Thus the welfare reform’s oft-cited black, teenage, single mother on welfare becomes an occasion to remind all children that “abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage [is] the expected standard for all school age children,” and that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity.”⁹ This policy indicates the willingness of states and the federal government to harness education to the task of normalizing populations, particularly in encouraging students to see the link between sex and money, and encouraging them to “[attain] self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.”¹⁰ But nowhere in any of this provision for sexuality education is an attempt to describe sexual activity that does not lead to unintended pregnancy. Sexual activity, not the potentially negative attendant consequences, is the focus of the welfare reform act’s provision for abstinence education, and “sexual activity” is very clearly limited to heterosexual activity.

Nancy Fraser argues that AFDC rules installed the state as patriarch of women on welfare. She contends that the differential forms of state support for single men and single women with children conform to dominant social notions of how men and women ought to be treated. Men, she argues, even when in need of support from the state, are conceived as independent, formerly wage-earning, autonomous individuals who ought to be able to spend their money as they see fit and are thus given monetary aid directly. Women, on the other hand, are treated as if they were part of the state’s “household.” Not to be trusted with cash, they are given food stamps and directed how to spend their aid by the “public patriarchy.” Further, their sex lives are watched over by the state, reinscribing cultural understandings of women as sexually irresponsible.¹¹

The recent national focus on the problem of single, black mothers on welfare as the central problem of welfare reform reinforced these same ideas about women’s irresponsible sexuality, as did the Hyde Amendment’s refusal of federal funds for lower-income women’s abortions. Parental notification laws limiting young women’s access to abortion send the same messages about women’s sexual irresponsibility.

Indeed, part of the rise in pregnancy among unmarried women is due to the implementation of parental notification laws discouraging young women from obtaining abortions. Thus, policy bent on decreasing teen pregnancy by decreasing teen access to abortions has had the effect of adding to the teen pregnancy rate. The rise in the teen pregnancy rate has then been used to justify further policy decisions to emphasize abstinence education and further limit young women's access to information on abortion, since agencies which receive federal funding for sexuality education must not provide information on abortion and must stress abstinence. Nowhere does welfare policy recognize that young women need access to more birth control and means to protect themselves from HIV and other STD's. In short, the "public patriarchy" once again demands chastity from those women over whom it watches.

These abstinence-based programs are not new, but coupled with welfare reform their problematic effects are more strongly attached to the creation of an ideal female sexual subject whose demonized opposite is the aforementioned black pregnant teen on welfare. In addition, their claims to "education" are dubious as they discourage critical, educational engagement with the subject of sexuality. Instead, these abstinence programs encourage the continuation of "gag rules" on sexuality education — by limiting the topic to abstinence and by their continued prohibition of discussions of, or referrals to, abortion services.¹² To illuminate the implications of welfare reform for the gender dynamics it encourages, I analyze Sex Respect, an abstinence-based, federally funded sex education program that encourages students, even if sexually active, to return to abstinence and reclaim "secondary virginity." Originally funded by the Adolescent Family Life Act of 1981, and the recipient of federal funds for revisions in 1990, Sex Respect is among the federally funded abstinence programs attached to religious organizations. In at least one instance, it has been pulled from schools for its sexist content and inaccurate information.¹³

UNCERTAIN DEFINITIONS OF SEX

Beyond the social legitimacy to which secondary virginity may give students access, I want to account for the popularity of secondary virginity because of other, potentially conflicted, social forces and discourses. "Secondary virginity" appears to be useful to adolescent girls for reasons not fully accounted for by the original intention of its authors. Yet, there is reason to be ambivalent about the subversive potential of "secondary virginity." Discourses of the New Right might be seen as empowering by those teenagers taking them up, but it is important to also see the normalizing force of these discourses that reinscribe a very particular conception of femininity and female sexuality. So there is something progressive about Sex Respect's idea of fluid identities and its recognition of our ability to reconfigure ourselves by altering our practices, but the coercive mechanisms that enforce one way of being an empowered woman are troubling, particularly when that "way" is based on a lack of knowledge, not a variety of knowledges and practices.

Part of the popularity of "secondary virginity" is related to the instability of the term "sexually active." A Brigham Young University review of studies on teen sexual activity has recently argued that estimates of teen sexual activity have been exaggerated based on a mis-definition of "sexually active." The review's authors

claim that many of the teens counted as “sexually active” have, in fact, only had sex once, and having had sex one or more times does not mean that they are “sexually active.” Indeed, the authors further argue, this limited definition of sexual activity, implying that once teens have had sex they will inevitably have sex again, discourages teens from abstinence by implying that they can no longer rightfully claim “virgin” status. The authors contend that this is a dangerous limitation to put on young people’s sexual choices and that curricula would do well to encourage even those students who have had sex to reconsider and achieve “secondary virginity.”¹⁴

Of course, adolescents perpetually reinvent themselves; indeed the reinvention attending “secondary virginity” follows much the same logic as teens who claim “monogamy for the weekend.” A continuing complaint among AIDS educators is that students have seemingly idiosyncratic definitions of “sex,” “monogamy,” and “virginity,” as well as other key terms involved in sex and AIDS education. A few confusions involve the time span of monogamy; according to some teens, it can last a weekend and involve “monogamously” another partner for the next weekend, and so on. In addition, for some teens, “virginity” appears to be a concept entirely centered around the vagina, specifically in the context of heterosexual intercourse. In order to then maintain their virginity but still engage in sexual activity, girls have unprotected anal intercourse. Clearly in neither of these two examples are the intentions of curricula reflected in the meanings students take from curricula. But it should be clear from the neglect of curricula to attend to complex definitions of “sex” that these conclusions are not the result of teen minds gone mad, but rather the result of curricular evasions of specificity. Abstinence curricula purport to avoid the sticky business of defining sexuality by maintaining a simple message — don’t have sex, and if you have already started, you can stop.

Sex Respect also recognizes that the “just say no to sex” strategy has produced some of its own problems. Just what is sex? How far can the limits of non-“sex” be pushed until one is indeed having sex? The curriculum thus advocates a form of virginity considerably more specific than simply avoiding “sex” — a suggestion most often interpreted to mean avoid penile-vaginal intercourse. Virginity in the aforementioned program means going no further than a good night kiss. A table included in the Sex Respect curriculum suggests that neither male nor female genitals are aroused by the goodnight kiss, though male genitals are aroused by necking, and female genitals are aroused by petting and heavy petting. To avoid any temptation to engage in vaginal-penile intercourse, students are instructed to avoid all activities beyond the “goodnight kiss.” Sex Respect’s model of sex presumes that boys, and girls, once aroused, will be unable to keep from having vaginal-penile intercourse — even though the curriculum recognizes the pleasurable aspects of necking, petting, and heavy petting. Thus, girls’ potential for pleasure without risk through either manual or oral stimulation of the clitoris is elided by a curriculum intent on protecting girls, not just from the negative effects of “sex,” but access to passion — presuming that passion and pleasure must inevitably lead to intercourse. Boys’ pleasure is the guiding model for what must happen if control over desire is lost. Girls do not have sexual agency in this model, except to the extent that their freedom is protected as in the following: “No petting if you want to be free.”

Sex Respect's lessons also centralize male agency; three of four longer stories of desire deferred feature boys as the main characters. However, the curriculum suggests that boys might be more comfortable with the term "celibacy," even though, in terms of a dictionary definition, "virginity" refers to abstaining from sex before marriage. But as Sex Respect notes, "virginity" is more closely associated with females than it is with males — though the hymen is not specifically mentioned in this passage, the indication is that girls have a closer tie with the term because of its physical implications.¹⁵ Sex Respect does acknowledge that girls may be sexually aggressive. One cartoon about girls who will call a celibate boy a "wimp" warns, "A threat to a guy's masculinity is a very sensitive blow. The liberation movement has produced some aggressive girls today, and one of the tough challenges for guys who say no will be the questioning of their manliness. Girls can use lines too!"¹⁶ One of those lines is "What's the matter with you? Are you gay or something?" — the only mention of homosexuality outside of the context of AIDS. Certainly, the curricula suggest that monogamous, married heterosexuality is the only correct option for sexual identity, a message clearly echoed in the welfare reform act statement that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity."¹⁷

STANDARDS OF BEAUTY AND SAYING "NO"

Standards of the body also come into play as young women negotiate sexuality. As *Vogue's* recent article on secondary virginity notes, young girls feel pressure to conform their bodies to standards of beauty and to have their bodies displayed in sex in ways that also conform to idealized images of women engaging in sexual activity. Since these standards are unreachable for most women, and since this means that sex, for women, is a performance where their pleasures and emotions are not present, and their bodies are present only as stand-ins for the ideal, sex is largely unappealing. Thus secondary virginity allows these young women a way out of a sexual identity that magnifies anxieties they already have about their bodies and appears to give them nothing in return: no pleasure, fear of pregnancy, fear of STI's.¹⁸ As the article points out, these young women:

had come of age in a country divided against itself, a country that fairly dripped with sex but one in which abortion was threatened and birth control pills were still not advertised, a country with a deep and enduring ambivalence — some would say antipathy — toward female sexuality and bodies, and these young women had taken it all in.¹⁹

Secondary virginity's appeal is tied to insecurities about bodily appearance and a recognition that female sexuality is not fully accepted. Some women avoid these problems by remaking their bodies through secondary virginity. Secondary virginity, therefore, parallels "technologies of the body" that examine the constructedness of even the materiality of the body. In Sex Respect, virginity is not only a state of mind or conscious decision; it is also a refiguring of the body as a result of this state of mind. As one publication puts it:

If you've never heard of the term "secondary virginity," you may chuckle. Once someone has lost their virginity it can't be reversed. But according to Sex Respect, Inc. you can reclaim your life as it was before and decide you're free to pursue other things. The idea is behave like a virgin and... wait until you're ready to get married. Maybe there's a parallel between the term "secondary virginity" and what Christians call "being born again," which we all know is a biological impossibility.²⁰

The physicality of this refusal of intercourse is underscored by the use of bodily imagery — “virginity” concretizes chastity, “born again” concretizes faith. These particular figures of physicality link the concrete body with thinking and deliberation. This technology of the body is strongly implicated in gender norms and status concerns. Certainly the history of adolescence is quite different for girls than it is for boys. Most of the qualities culturally associated with adolescence are male: rebellion, hotheadedness, explicit sexuality, risk. Adolescent girls, on the other hand, were supposed to remain pure, passive, and obedient. Until the 1970s, most status crimes — acts only designated a crime based on the age of the accused, and punishment for which may last until the person reaches majority, were differentially punished based on gender. Girls tended (and still tend) to be labeled incorrigible for staying out late, while boys attained the same label for more serious crimes of robbery or assault.²¹ Thus the rambunctiousness of adolescence is less possible for girls, and more likely to elicit a greater degree of punishment. It should not be surprising, then, to find girls recouping status through virginity.

TESTIFYING TO THE IDEALIZED FAMILY

In addition, this alteration requires a public declaration marking a commitment to, or return to, chastity. The sociality of this rededication also parallels the born-again practice of “testifying.” This is not a private decision with private implications, but rather is meant to be shared through testimony. Indeed, these secondary virgins, through a variety of programs like Best Friends, a girls-only organization, share their stories of sex, their fall, and their redemption to shore up and display their return to the fold. Best Friends is also attentive to other aspects of young girls’ school success, particularly among lower-income communities of color, by providing adult mentorship, role models, and basic nutrition and health information. Even so, its messages subtly criticize the family structure of many of the girls themselves in the message that “children deserve to begin life with married adult parents.”²² Girls are thus potentially distanced from their own family as they begin to learn the connections between the successes of the idealized two-parent family and the apparently dysfunctional single-parent family. Unlike Sex Respect which instructs students to avoid sex until marriage, Best Friends encourages girls to remain abstinent until after high school, their focus is thus more strongly on educational achievement than marriage. As one mentor described the program, “it’s not about sex, [but about] being a child.”²³ To underscore the necessary contradiction between the terms “youth” and “sexuality,” this particular program further argues that virginity itself is good for girls’ physical and emotional health. As one Best Friend participant put it: “It was hard to say ‘no’ until I became a Best Friends girl. I have all these friends that check on me and say ‘how you doin’?’ One time I was going to go with this guy who had this great ‘line’ but they wouldn’t let me. I’m really glad... We watch out for each other at best Friends [sic].”²⁴

Rings to show evidence of a pledge of abstinence, rallies supporting virginity and group homes of girls sharing sex stories well into the night in a near orgiastic display of desire deferred, or more to the point, desire redirected, all mark the new form of sexual identity that accompanies these refusals of sex. This is a Foucauldian frenzy of talking sex under the guise of not talking sex, but also a warning of the

stresses sex puts disproportionately on young girls and their potential strategies for contravening these pressures without giving up sexual identity. These girls make sexual identity a centerpiece of their self-conception and their public display of their bodies. They are untouchable, but on view, and must constantly renew the status of their visible allegiance to virginity. News coverage of, and a recent *Ms.* article on, high school girls involved in the Best Friends program and college-age women involved in other commitments to abstinence display the good clean fun of girls getting together in a sexualized atmosphere whose intention is to keep them in a high state of excitement about their virginity.²⁵

These examples underscore the social elements of desire and sexuality. As John Gagnon and Richard Parker argue, “Rather than asking what internal forces create desire, the questions are, how is desire elicited, organized and interpreted as a social activity? How is desire produced and how is desire consumed?.... Desire... becomes a social rather than an individual phenomenon.”²⁶ Decisions about desire and about the desire to wait are made in the context of repeated social choices and very often in each of these programs in a homosocial context. Both the social element and the element of choice are crucial to the particular form these sexual identities take. True Love Waits, Sex Respect, and the Best Friends program all centralize choice as a paramount concern for adolescent development. Even in their articulation of “traditional values,” these curricula position themselves as a freely made choice in a society they claim increasingly pressures young people to have sex. Thus, the prohibition of sexuality is an active choice in identity-formation that marks the maturity and rationality of the individual. Abstinence is not a presumed quality of adolescent life, but rather a state that requires thought, deliberation, action, and continued commitment.

These examples show that identity can be created through productive refusals, though we ought to ask why “nine out of ten of the girls under sixteen surveyed by a teen services program at Atlanta’s Grady Memorial Hospital ‘wanted to learn how to say no.’”²⁷ Certainly saying “no” is compatible with a critical, educational approach to sex education, and the crucial difference between an educational approach and a conservative approach is that education should give girls and boys access to resources and strategies that encourage them to make real, considered choices. The implicit norm in conservative curricula, however, is not choice, but “be a good girl (or boy).” Understanding one’s sexual identity as fluid, then, in conservative curricula is not meant to question socially prescribed sexual subject positions for girls and women, but rather reinscribe them. However, even as conservatives attempt to stem the tide of adolescent sex, they inadvertently create new spaces and new varieties of adolescent sexual identity — varieties produced out of the refusal of sex.

These identity formations and spaces draw attention to the persistent alterations of sexual meanings and practices that occur despite “gag rules” in classrooms and curricula. As such they serve as reminders that students are actively involved in the articulation of their identities in spaces not often recognized by curricula as “sexual.” The identities incited by the testifying festivals of “secondary virginity”

point to the centrality of context and relationships to sexual identity and understandings. The spaces for articulating and contesting identity entailed by curricula and curricular debate are places where identity is enacted. Students do not come to places and relationships as fully formed in their sexual identity, but rather through discursive meanderings, they change and alter their practices and the meanings of those practices. As thrilling in their libidinal excess as these spaces and identities are, they also multiply dangers. Without information and strategies to encourage protection from HIV and STI's, contraception, and sexuality in general, these spaces of sexual identity are quite problematic. It is worth remembering that abstinence has the highest failure rate of all contraception and that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

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 3. Ingrassia, "Virgin Cool," 60.
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 16. *Ibid.*, 85.
 17. H.R. 3734, sec. 510(b)(2).
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