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### Abstract

This research paper discusses the effects of enforced purity on the sexuality of young women. The purity movement is a movement that started in the late 1990s in the Midwest with the aim to protect young women from the sexual scandals of the world. However, many women within this movement are uninformed about their bodies, their sexual feelings, how to protect themselves against pregnancy and STDS, and warning signs of unhealthy relationships. The method used in this paper is analysis through literature review. The literature review contains sources of supporters of the Purity Movement, and those against this movement. Overall, this paper connects this movement with the sexual double standard, because such uses as purity rings, purity balls, and overprotective parenting are not as commonly seen with young men. This paper also serves to inform that sexuality for both sexes is normal, and that young men and women should be taught about their bodies and sexuality in a way that is not shameful.

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*Amanda Paul*

### **Abstract**

This research paper discusses the effects of enforced purity on the sexuality of young women. The purity movement is a movement that started in the late 1990s in the Midwest with the aim to protect young women from the sexual scandals of the world. However, many women within this movement are uninformed about their bodies, their sexual feelings, how to protect themselves against pregnancy and STDS, and warning signs of unhealthy relationships. The method used in this paper is analysis through literature review. The literature review contains sources of supporters of the Purity Movement, and those against this movement. Overall, this paper connects this movement with the sexual double standard, because such uses as purity rings, purity balls, and overprotective parenting are not as commonly seen with young men. This paper also serves to inform that sexuality for both sexes is normal, and that young men and women should be taught about their bodies and sexuality in a way that is not shameful.

### **Introduction**

The sexual double standard has been around for centuries, and it is not a new concept in many communities within the United States. This standard is defined as a set of moral codes that are more severe towards women than men, in reference to sexual behavior (Merriam-Webster). These standards make it so women are punished for sexual behavior, while men are rewarded and encouraged to take part in various sexual situations. As Judith Baer states, “The ways society exercises power over sexuality include, but are not limited to determining what constitutes sex, who may do it, who initiates it, and who enjoys it”

(Price, 2011, p. 284). Throughout history there have been multiple ways that men and women have taken part in policing sexual behavior in women. In today’s society, it is through the purity movement that female sexualities are being policed. The purity movement is where, in the media and pop-culture, celebrities are shown as “pure”, and they make abstinence look fun (Valenti, 2009, p. 24). In addition, the purity movement is within our own school systems, thanks to President Bush’s push for teaching only abstinence within sex education (Price, 2011, p. 284). This is not to say that sex does not come without consequences, because 17% of people living with HIV/AIDS are teenagers (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). Half of all HPV cases are under the age of 24. In addition, each year in the United States, about 750,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19 will become pregnant (Guttmacher Institute, 2013). Nevertheless, these high rates can be related to abstinence-only education because states with the highest rates only promote abstinence and do not have many family planning agencies to help educate young people. This lack of education helps reinforce the idea of purity, because many women are not given any other options. The purity movement is patriarchy at its finest as young women do not get to choose for themselves or their bodies. Instead, the decision is left up to their fathers, the government, and the school system. Young women fail to recognize and act on their own sexual desires due to the purity movement, which hurts them because of their lack of control over their own sexualities and bodies.

Virginity pledges are often taken in classrooms and at churches. The pledge

adolescents take state they will remain chaste until their wedding night (Ehrlich, 2006, p. 179). Even though male students are encouraged to take these pledges too, the lessons often focus on young women. For example, a way in which purity pledges are done is where gold rose pins are handed out at Christian youth group events, with a small card attached that says: "You are like a beautiful rose. Each time you engage in premarital sex, a precious petal is stripped away. Don't leave your future husband holding a bare stem. Abstain" (Valenti, 2009, p. 32). What this quotation says is that young women are only seen as a "flower." This is evidenced by the tactics that abstinence educators use, and also because of the statistics; 10% of teenage boys take a virginity pledge versus 16% of teenage girls (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 94). In this model of sexuality, women are only seen as worthy of a husband and as genuine individuals if they have kept their legs closed. Overall, women are not seen for their intelligence or their talents but rather if they still have a hymen (Valenti, 2009, p. 13).

Purity balls operate on the same idea as purity pledges, except young women do not get to sign the pledge themselves. This idea was introduced by Randy Wilson in 1996, due to the sexual scandals which had occurred that year: the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, was charged with lying about his sex life, Viagra became the fastest selling drug in the pharmaceutical industry, and many sexual taboos were represented within the media as well. Wilson, who is a father to five daughters, wanted a way to feel like he could protect his daughters from the realities of a sexual world (Gibbs, Silver, & Sayre, 2008). For purity balls, girls as young as four or five, and some as old as 21, get dressed up in ball gowns, get their hair and nails done, and are escorted by their fathers who are dressed up

in tuxedos (Watkins, 2008, p. 44). The father, instead of the daughter, takes the vow, which states:

*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 as the high priest in my home. This covering will be used by God to influence generations to come. (Valenti, 2009, p. 66)*

Within this pledge a father makes, the word "covering" is used, which establishes that the young girl or woman can not decide for themselves but rather needs her father to protect her. The father takes the pledge, and the daughter must sign as a witness to the pledge (Valenti, 2009, p. 65). The evening progresses with the young girls placing white roses at the foot of a cross as their sign of purity to God, and Wilson and a fellow pastor, Steve Holt, draw swords to create an inverted "V" where fathers and daughters kneel and drop more roses, which symbolizes the father's promise to protect his daughter's purity. The event ends with a final father-daughter dance to the song "I'll Always Be Your Baby" (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 103).

## Literature Review

According to many abstinence groups and youth ministries, their whole purpose is to protect the purity of young people; however, there is not a uniform definition of purity, which makes the pledges confusing. For example, the LifeWay Ministries, which created the well-known group, True Love Waits, advocates their own definition of purity:

*'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his own heart (Matthew 5:27-28). By Jesus'*

*definition, being sexually pure means not even dwelling on thoughts of sex with someone other than a spouse. Until you are married, sexual purity means saying no to sexual intercourse, oral sex, and even sexual touching. It means saying no to a physical relationship that causes you to be “turned on” sexually. (LifeWay Students)*

From the quote, according to True Love Waits, teens are not to even think about sex, because then they will be considered “impure” in the eyes of the Lord. However, according to Cary Backenger, a clinical psychotherapist, these purity pledges are asking the impossible, as “No pledge can counter the fact that teenagers are, in fact, sexual beings post-puberty... You can’t turn that off” (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 99).

The issues of defining “purity” are not the only problems that arise from these pledges, because many young individuals have their own definitions of what constitutes as sex, as well as virginity. A study done by a group of researchers from the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in 2007 recorded ideas of what young people define as “sex”. They cited a previous study which found that 99.5% of students consider vaginal intercourse as sex and 81% believe penile-anal contact was considered sex, yet 60% of students did not believe that oral-genital contact was considered sex (Bersamin, Fisher, Grube, Hill, & Walker, 2007, p. 182). In their own study, the researchers found similar results: Over 90% of students considered both vaginal and anal intercourse to be sex. Less than half of their students, however, considered genital-oral stimulation to be sex (p. 182). An interesting finding they reported was that more females marked higher risk sex behavior (i.e. anal and oral sex) as not being sex, which would support the idea that women are purposely kept uneducated due to the purity movement (p. 182). The researchers also asked the students in their study what they considered

an abstinent behavior, finding that 24% of their participants view anal as an abstinent behavior, while 37% believe that oral is also an abstinent behavior. In addition, 75% of their participants also believe mutual masturbation to be within the realm of abstinence (p. 183). Their findings conflict with the teachings of LifeWay ministries, which believes that even thinking about sex before marriage is not being abstinent. A similar study done by Jason Hans and Claire Kimberly in 2011 found that 98.8% of students consider vaginal intercourse as sex, and 76.2% consider penile-anal contact as sex. However, 77% of their sample consider oral-genital contact to not identify as “sex” (Hans, Kimberly, 2011, p. 334). Where their study differs other than the year is that they also asked professionals at their university for their input on what they considered to be sex. The researchers recorded that 99.8% of professionals believed vaginal intercourse to be sex, and 95.9% believed that penile contact with the anus is to be considered sex (p. 334). In addition, 85.2% of professionals consider oral-genital contact is sex (p. 334). They also asked about masturbation and mutual masturbation (p. 334). They found that none of their students considered masturbation to be sex (p. 338). Additionally, 12.3% of the students considered mutual masturbation to be sex (p. 334). Three percent of the professionals at the university believed that masturbation was considered sex (p. 338). Out of the professionals, 63.9% of them also considered mutual masturbation to count as a sex behavior (p. 334). What the researchers concluded was that the professionals acknowledged certain behaviors to be “sex” due to religious backgrounds (p. 336). The study done by Bersamin, Fisher, Grube, Hill, and Walker does differ from the study done by Hans and Kimberly in that the first study was only comprised of a student-aged sample,

whereas Hans and Kimberly's study focused on students and professionals' perspectives on sex. Their findings are similar in that young people do not consider higher risk sexual behaviors as actual sex acts. Part of the reason they do not consider anal and oral as sexual acts as often as they do with vaginal intercourse is that they are not properly taught about sex due to abstinence-only education.

Abstinence-only education hurts young people more than it helps them because teens are not properly taught about the reality of sex and how to protect themselves. The issue with abstinence-only educators is that over 80% spread false and misleading information about sex and reproductive health (Valenti, 2009, p. 218). In addition, these programs have received over \$1.3 billion dollars of federal funding since 1996, even though 82% of Americans support programs that teach about different forms of contraception and how to use them effectively (Valenti, 2009, p. 218). Each year, abstinence education receives approximately \$178 million a year in federal funding (Valenti, 2009, p. 32). However, studies indicate that virginity pledges, frequently offered during abstinence lessons, only delay sex for up to eighteen months (Advocates for Youth, 2007). Even though these programs delay sexual intercourse for teens, they do not entirely prevent sex. This can be a problem because students are taught "research" from abstinence-only educators that if teenagers use condoms in high school, they have a 14% fail rate each time, and a 50% cumulative fail rate by the end of high school (Jackson, Kay, 2008, p. 14). In reality though, when a condom is used correctly, there is a 3% fail-rate, not 14% (p. 14). However, those are conservative estimates, because Advocates For Youth argues that some abstinence groups tell their students condoms have a

30% fail rate, birth control causes cancer, and pregnancy is possible from just touching someone else's genital region (Advocates For Youth, 2007).

Teaching false information is not the only item abstinence-only education advocates tell their students; they also promote marriage. According to LifeWay students, marriage is the only sure way to know that your partner loves you. "When you are wearing a wedding ring, you won't have to hope your partner loves you; you will have heard your spouse pledge to you in front of God, your families, and your friends. Anything less cheapens sex" (LifeWay Students). However, in America, half of all marriages end in divorce, and going by logic, this would mean that their partner does not love them (American Psychological Association, 2010). In addition, the LifeWay ministries even say if people abstain from sex until their wedding night, and so does their spouse there is no chance of contracting an STI:

*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.*  
(Grant)

There are quite a few problems with this quotation. One is that Grant never brings up that children can be born with AIDS if their parent had it prior to their birth. In 2009, 10,384 children under the age of 13 were diagnosed with HIV, which they had been exposed to during their mothers'

pregnancies, births, or breast milk (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). In addition, another problem is that he assumes that all married couples are faithful, when according to the *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 50% of married women will cheat, and 60% of married men will cheat. Cumulatively, that means in 80% of marriages, at least one of the spouses will cheat at least one time (Shugerman). The issue is that many ministries and abstinence groups are pushing marriage like it is the ultimate way to obtain happiness in life.

Ehrlich argues against the ideas promoted by the LifeWay ministries and other similar groups because, instead of informing students about their options, they use scare tactics. For example, students are told that premarital sex damages their “bonding mechanism”, which is the idea that once someone has a sexual history prior to marriage they can not fully bond to their spouse. In addition, Ehrlich believes students are led to believe that premarital sex can lead to bitterness, depression, loss of friends, and low marks in school, in addition to an unsuccessful marriage in the future (p. 176). She argues that we need to stop policing sexual behavior in our societies because it is doing more harm than good:

*We have also seen the resurrection of historic assumptions about female responsibility for male sexual behavior, which, together with the legal assault on their autonomy, interfere with the ability of young women to make informed decisions for themselves in accordance to their own moral values and sense of place in this world.* (p. 181)

This quotation explains how abstinence-only education and virginity pledges take away choice and women’s control over their own bodies within our society. Many believe offering contraceptives and family planning programs are the answer. However,

Bersharov (1994) disagrees. He says that all young people have access to adequate contraceptives. He says that no matter what state you live in, there are always family planning clinics that are happy to hand out condoms. However, that is not the case. There are many clinics in every state thanks to Title X, but those services do not always apply for teenagers, especially in Southern and Mid-Western states. Many teens in such areas are required to get permission in order to access contraceptives (Planned Parenthood). In addition, Bersharov goes on to say that availability of contraceptives is not the problem; the problem is due to non-use. However, not every teen just disregards the idea of protection. Some of them actually do not know about condoms and birth control because the communities that they live in allow for a sheltering effect. For example, Jessica Decker, who had taken a virginity pledge, began to start engaging in premarital sex when she was 15 years old. She did not know what a condom was, and because she did not know how to protect herself, she was one of many teenagers who were diagnosed with HPV (Watkins, 2008, p. 52). In addition, Bersharov argues that programs like “abstinence plus” are the best fit for sex education. Abstinence plus is where students are still taught about contraceptives but pushed toward abstaining from sex. He believes it works because students see that relationships are serious. However, there is supposed to be a separation of church and state, and abstinence has a religious connotation to it, which students should not have to be exposed to. In addition, even in these abstinence plus programs, because abstinence is still being taught, young women will still be stereotyped and sexually shamed, because their tactics are aimed mainly at women.

Kimala Price has a different stance on contraceptives. As a policy scholar, she believes young women should have access to over-the-counter emergency contraceptives (Plan B). This is because she disagrees with the common notion that it is a permission slip to engage in promiscuous behavior, especially amongst the pro-life campaign. "Pro-life advocates... argue that the cause of unplanned pregnancy is the lack of responsibility and control that has emerged from a culture of selfishness and sexual promiscuity" (Price, 2011, pp. 284-285). Another issue within policy of availability of emergency contraception is that conservatives, in writing their own ideas about policy, call female minors "little girls", whereas advocates for universal access to emergency contraceptives refer to them as "female minors" (p. 283). Clearly, the conservatives do not view teenage females under the age of eighteen to be adults; however, most of them have adult functioning sexual reproductive systems. Conservatives have even called the Gardasil vaccine the "whore drug," because it would give young women the idea that they can go and have promiscuous sex without repercussions of HPV and ovarian cancers (Ryan). This is another instance where the sexual double standard is alive and well because it is not often that the promiscuity level of young teenage boys is a pressing problem in our society, let alone politics. However, the government likes to exercise control in order to gain a sense of balance from hegemony (Watkins, 2008, p. 17).

Watkins (2008) argues that through the sexual double standard, virginity pledges, and especially purity balls, men are exercising control over women. For example, at the purity balls when the father takes the pledge, because it is his pledge, the daughter can not refuse. This pledge gives the father almost total control over his

daughter's sexuality. However, with integrity balls, some only have to pledge they will never have sex with a virgin girl (Valenti, 2009, p. 67). The difference is that it is *his* pledge to make, which shows that they have control over their own sexualities, while females do not. Watkins also argues that these pledges are made for them due to misconceptions within hegemony:

*[H]egemonic masculinity is not merely what a man should be but it is about how specific groups of men that inhibit some of these characteristics and use them to gain control over subordinate groups... [T]he concept of hegemonic masculinity also takes on the challenge of the dominant group naturalizing its ideals as the status quo, making it appear normal so the subaltern groups do not question its authority... Being a man is so dominant and ingrained in the foundations of our culture that females have a hard time escaping from that control because many women do not realize that their behavior only serves to reinforce that hegemonic masculine framework. (Watkins, 2008, p. 9)*

Watkins is arguing that because of our society's social construction, everyone takes part in creating these gender roles where men are the most dominant, and we support that system because we are not separated from it. Fahs (2010) argues similarly to Watkins, stating that the social construction of sexuality in our society prevents women from being able to assert their own needs and desires. Instead, women are told that they are to be passive, as anything other than passiveness is met with resistance in society (Fahs, 2010, p. 120). Society is set up so that the dominant group, males, gets all of the control.

Randy Wilson, the creator of purity balls, created a new way for men to exercise control over their families and their daughters. His methods make it a lot easier for men to seize control because he says that



his events are not solely about virginity but about father-daughter bonding. While these fathers and daughters may be bonding, the overriding purpose of the event is to protect purity. Within these balls, war-like images are shown, with the swords and pledges that indicate the fathers will fight off any other man who wants to be anywhere near their daughter. In addition, Watkins argues that given the language in the pledge, the man is considered the “high priest” within his own home, which also gives the idea that he controls his wife as well, although the mothers are absent during this entire process (Watkins, 2008, p. 26). However, studies indicate that the best outcomes for women sexually are through an open relationship between mother and daughter (Fahs, 2010, p. 135). In addition, if a young woman does not have a father, another man in her life, such as an uncle or a grandfather, must escort her, not her mother (p. 135). Once again, this shows how mothers do not even get a say about their own daughters, because the man is a high priest, not a woman.

Men not only control female sexuality as a whole but also what women will know about their own bodies and desires. Watkins argues that the system purity balls and virginity pledges have created make women feel ashamed about their changing bodies and sexual desires, as “...[S]he will have to battle strong desires that she may not completely understand because no one has talked to her about them” (p. 45). In fact, because men control what young women will know about sex and their bodies, they do not even know what their pledge is about:

*When I ask Hannah Smith, fifteen, what purity means to her, she answers, “I actually don’t know”. Her older sister Emily jumps in: “Purity means ... I don’t know how to explain it. It is important to us that we promise ourselves and to our fathers and to God that we stay pure until... it is hard to*

*explain”... [T]he girls seem so unsure of the reasons behind their vows that I can’t help but wonder if they’ve just signed a contract whose terms they didn’t fully understand. (Baumgardner, 2011: 99)*

From this quotation, when Baumgardner interviews some young women at a purity ball, she sees a theme of lack of knowledge about their purity pledge. Even though it a pledge for the father, the young women must sign as a witness to the pledge. It is evident that these balls are problematic because young girls do not know what it is that they are supposed to abstain from in order to protect themselves from impurity. Watkins also argues that another issue regarding lack of education about sexuality for these young women is that there are girls that are too young attending purity balls. These girls can be as young as kindergarten age, and to ask a commitment like that of them is unfair because they do not know what they are signing (Watkins, 2008, p. 44).

Advocates of the purity movement teach women that they do not express or feel sexual feelings but rather romantic tendencies. The problem with teaching young women that they are not nearly as sexual as men sets up a system where the sexual double standard can thrive at even greater rate. These programs and advocates teach women that:

*True Love Waits argues...[T]he 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 love. (Fahs, 2010, p. 121)*

According to the quotation, True Love Waits teaches young women that they do not want sex. Instead, they want relationships, and that those who do want sex are just lonely and unloved. This sends the message that women are to be passive and that they

should not want sex. Going further into this argument, Ehrlich speculates that this system which is being taught reinforces the gatekeeper system, where women are fully responsible and men are totally out of control:

*A pervasive theme is that boys have little control over their sexual desires and are easily satisfied by casual sex, whereas girls have far less natural desire and care about developing the emotional dimensions of a relationship... As the Sex Respect curriculum states, '[B]ecause they become physically aroused less easily, girls are still in a good position to slow down the young man and help him learn balance in a relationship'. (Erllich, 2006: 178)*

The issue with advocates and fathers teaching these ideas to young men and women is that it reinforces the stereotype that women can control the male sex drive, which will further stigmatize women as the perpetrators, not the victims.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the lack of control over their own bodies and sexualities, young women fail to recognize and act on their own sexual desires due to the purity movement. Suppressing sexual nature is not only unfair but in many cases impossible. Purity movement advocates do not believe the idea that sexual desire and activity is normal for those who are not married. Instead, these advocates force "purity" ideals on young women, to the point that they do not even understand changes within their own bodies during puberty. They are also taught to suppress their sexual desires and replace them with praise to the Lord.

It is not fair for a father to take control of his daughter's sexuality to the point where she cannot figure out what her body is telling her. In addition, it is not justifiable that conservatives are so afraid of

sexually-liberated women that abstinence-only education prevails in 23 states, which causes rising statistics in failed contraceptive use. While the model of the purity balls may be problematic, there is not too much that can be done about them; as long as we have the sexual double standard, some form of sexual repression will exist, such as purity balls. However, what we can do as a country is stand up against abstinence-only education in our public schools. Abstinence-only education emphasizes teachings and morals that come from the Bible, and in the First Amendment, it states all citizens in the United States have freedom of religion, which to a certain extent can also be used as freedom from religion. We need separation of church and state, because it is not fair for teenage kids to be exposed to the Bible's teachings if they are not religious to begin with. We need to give kids the proper tools to be able to act responsibly, while emphasizing that sex can lead to serious consequences, such as pregnancy and STIs, not that no man will want to marry a young woman if she has premarital sex and that she is damaged goods. We need to teach young women that they are more than a hymen; they are a person with talent, intelligence, and a personality, which are the reasons why a man will want to marry them someday. Lastly, we need to teach young women that there is nothing wrong with following their sexual nature because it is just that, *nature*.

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