

Nadine Dorries' proposals for abstinence education are baffling, off-point and inimical to young women's, as well as men's, sexual health

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Sophie Drouet argues that compulsory abstinence education would endanger young women's capacities to make informed decisions about their sex lives, burden them with the exclusive responsibility of not getting pregnant, shame them for having sex, and prescribe a dangerously retrograde attitude towards female sexuality



Conservative MP Nadine Dorries' proposed amendment to Bill 185 on sex education was set to go through Parliament for a second reading today. In this Bill, she advocates that girls between the age of 13 and 16 be taught abstinence as a compulsory part of their sexual education. Expected benefits would supposedly include a reduction of teenage pregnancies and instances of sexual abuse, and would teach women "self-respect and how not to make relationship mistakes" (a transcript of the debate, dated May 4th 2011, can be found [here](#)). While Dorries' concerns over Britain's high teen pregnancy rates and the increasing sexualisation of girls are indeed worrying matters, her proposed solution is baffling, off point and inimical to young women's as well as men's sexual health.

In a "society saturated with sex", she claims, it is important to expand sexual education beyond the mechanics of safe sex and the risks of sexually transmitted diseases. Fair enough. I won't argue against the necessity of emphasizing mutual respect, consent and healthy relationships in the curriculum. Still, that doesn't seem to feature much on Dorries' agenda. Instead she'd rather embrace a sex education driven by sexist stereotypes: fragile little girls who need to say "no" to the dangerous sexual advances of young men. No one could have broken it down into more simplistic terms: if Britain has such high teen pregnancy rates, she implies, it's because no one has taught those girls how to say "no"!

And if they fail to uphold their virtue by refusing sex, we know who's to blame. Mandating abstinence education exclusively for girls suggests that their decision-making around their sexuality is completely unaffected by external factors. Young men are entirely left out of the equation, as if their own sexuality were unproblematic, when in fact they, too, are affected by teenage parenthood, peer pressure and are equally interested in fostering healthy relationships. Despite her repeated emphasis on relationships, Dorries has forgotten that it takes two to tango.

If her anti-women position isn't clear enough, her comments on sexual abuse are limp:

"If a stronger 'just say no' message was given to children in school, it might have an impact on sex abuse, because a lot of girls, when sex abuse takes place, don't realize until later that was the wrong thing to do..."

Sex abuse doesn't take place because victims forget to say "no". Sex abuse occurs because of sexual abusers disregarding if there is a "no". The idea that prevention should focus on children's behaviour is a shameful tactic of victim blaming, giving these children ultimate responsibility for all sexual acts that happen to them – consensual or not – and is a dangerous step back for children and women's rights. Dorries insists saying "no" would empower young women. And indeed, it is

okay to not want sex but women shouldn't be the only ones learning that, otherwise it puts them into a position of sexual gatekeepers, alluding to notions of female chastity and morality.

Additionally, who could possibly praise the "advantages" of abstinence education when they've been scientifically and empirically debunked? Why advocate for its inclusion when the country that has championed abstinence education is also the one with the highest teen pregnancy rates of all Western countries – the [United States](#)? Although Dorries doesn't go as far as advocating abstinence-only, the only aspect of sexual education currently mandatory in the UK is the biology of reproduction (although many schools have included a focus on relationships). It is hypocritical to suggest that including abstinence would merely reflect a more comprehensive approach since it would then be one of two portions of the curriculum compulsory by law.

Figures released by the Office for National Statistics in 2010 show rates in England for teenage pregnancies have declined by **13%** between 1999 and 2008, and are currently at their lowest rate since the early 1980s. However, the UK still has the **highest rates** in all of Western Europe for teenage birth and abortion rates. Why spend time on something known to be ineffective? Surely it couldn't hurt to look at the Netherlands whose rates are five times lower, right?

Of course, the increasing sexualisation of girls (Dorries speaks of [the sale of padded bras to 7-year old girls](#)) is problematic, and sexual education should help young people navigate through incessant messages that encourage them to have sex. But teaching girls how to say "no" will only expose them to contradictory discourses without giving them the tools to make informed decisions. A sex-positive education is absolutely needed to empower young women and continue tackling issues of reproductive health. **It is not about saying "no"; it is about learning what it means to genuinely and enthusiastically consent to sex.**

Healthy decision-making regarding sex and relationships should be equally taught to both parties involved, with an emphasis on mutual respect and consent. Abstinence education will not empower young women and – do I even need to say it? – it will not, looking at previous examples, drive teen pregnancy rates down. It will endanger young women's capacities to make informed decisions about their sex lives, burden them with the exclusive responsibility of not getting pregnant, shame them for having sex, and prescribe a dangerously retrograde attitude towards female sexuality. As Labour MP Chris Bryant rightfully commented, "this is the daftest piece of legislation I have ever seen".

This post first appeared on the [LSE's Engenderings](#) blog

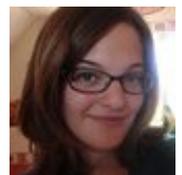
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