



# Sex, Lies & Stereotypes

How Abstinence-Only Programs  
Harm Women and Girls

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with Ashley Jackson

Legal Momentum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
Full report is available at  
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Harvard School of Public Health  
PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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This report is based upon recommendations arising from *Teaching Only Abstinence: Consequences for Girls and Society*, an expert roundtable sponsored by Legal Momentum in partnership with the Harvard Law School Human Rights Program and the Program on International Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health in September 2006.

Founded in 1970, **Legal Momentum** is the nation's oldest legal advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls. With headquarters in New York City and offices in Washington, D.C., it is a national leader in establishing legal, legislative, and educational strategies to secure equality and justice for women. Legal Momentum uses public policy, litigation, and public education and outreach to address specific issues in the areas that are of greatest concern to women in the United States: freedom from violence against women, equal work and equal pay; the health of women and girls; and strong families and strong communities. Legal Momentum's **Sexuality and Family Rights** program works to promote women's autonomy, protect women's sexual and reproductive rights, and expose the government's funding and promotion of policies that limit these rights.

The **Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School** seeks to give impetus and direction to international human rights work at Harvard Law School. The Human Rights Program fosters coursework and participation of students in human rights activities through its summer fellowships, clinical work, speaker series, applied research, and scholarship.

The **Harvard School of Public Health's Program on International Health and Human Rights** promotes practical and effective responses to global public health challenges through the innovative application of human rights. This is done through a combination of research, capacity building, policy development, and health programming in a variety of areas focusing on HIV/AIDS, reproductive and sexual health, and child and adolescent health.

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# Preface

## **U.S. Representative Henry A. Waxman, Chair, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform**

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This report raises essential questions about the negative effects of abstinence-only programs. Abstinence-only programs have received over \$1.5 billion in federal funding, yet these programs are often based on ideology, not science, and contain inaccurate and biased information.

In 2004, I asked my staff to evaluate the content of curricula used in federally funded abstinence-only programs. The Bush administration had dramatically increased federal funding for abstinence-only programs, and I was concerned that taxpayer money was being spent on programs that had not been shown to be effective.

The false and misleading statements identified in the majority of these curricula should concern anyone who cares about gender and health.

A number of the curricula we reviewed treated stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific fact. One curriculum taught that women need “financial support,” while men need “admiration.” Another instructed participants that: “women gauge their happiness and judge their success on their relationships. Men’s happiness and success hinge on their accomplishments.”

What’s more, many of the curricula contained inaccurate statements about crucial health issues such as HIV, cervical cancer, and contraception. Young women are impacted by this misinformation in multiple ways—and ill-served by the corresponding lack of comprehensive information. These curricula, and similarly flawed programs, continue to be taught in our schools nationwide.

These findings make clear why this report from Legal Momentum, the Harvard Law School’s Human Rights Program, and the Harvard School of Public Health’s Program on International Health and Human Rights is so important. An in-depth exploration of the relationship between abstinence-only education and girls’ health and well-being, the report raises important questions about the effect of these programs both domestically and internationally. I recommend it to all who are involved in discussions of sex education policy, from school boards to federal policymakers.

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# Introduction

Legal Momentum, in partnership with the Human Rights Project at Harvard Law School and the Program on International Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, convened a roundtable on abstinence-only programs on September 29, 2006, at the Harvard Law School. The roundtable brought together experts from a wide range of disciplines to consider the impact of abstinence-only programs on women and girls.

While many organizations and individuals have denounced abstinence-only programs as harmful, few have focused on the specific impact these programs have on young women. This roundtable brought together participants of diverse backgrounds for the purpose of examining abstinence-only education with gender specifically in mind. The ensuing discussion made clear that although abstinence-only programs appear to be gender-neutral—on the surface they apply equally to girls and boys—in practice they have harmful, differential effects on women and girls, both in the U.S. and internationally.

The roundtable discussion raised a number of issues, including:

- how abstinence-only programs censor truthful and practical information about sexuality, contraception, and abortion, and thereby particularly subject women and girls to the risk of unintended pregnancy and put them at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs);
- how abstinence-only programs teach gender stereotypes that negatively affect adolescents' sexual development and their adult relationships later in life;
- how programs that feature incomplete or misleading information on preventing HIV/AIDS, STIs, and pregnancy impact public health, particularly for at-risk individuals;

precluded from federal funding. The serious negative public health consequences, particularly for women and girls, are examined in depth. For example, there is substantial reliable evidence that abstinence-only programs fail to persuade young people to abstain from sex until marriage. When youth schooled by abstinence-only programs do become sexually active, the programs' anti-condom messages may actually discourage them from practicing safe sex, making the negative information the programs offer about contraception and disease prevention particularly dangerous. Such messages deny young people the opportunity to receive vital education to protect their health and well-being and, in particular, impede girls' ability to avoid unwanted pregnancy and STIs to which they are more biologically susceptible.

Chapter 3 examines the particular harms abstinence-only programs cause to women and girls. By using biased and misleading information, employing scare tactics aimed at young women, and promoting a view of human sexuality and relationships that presents gender stereotypes as truth and homophobic sentiments as fact, abstinence-only programs particularly target women and girls. The report exposes how abstinence-only curricula frequently employ outdated gender stereotypes, portraying girls as naturally chaste and casting them as the gatekeepers of rampant male sexuality. By making sex education into abstinence education, abstinence-only programs fail to genuinely address critical issues such as sexual behavior, sexual orientation, and

sexual violence or coercion. Moreover, abstinence-only programs violate women's and girls' human rights by denying them critical reproductive health information.

Turning to the worldwide picture, Chapter 4 considers how the U.S. exports its abstinence-only agenda to the detriment of women and girls internationally. Although the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), launched by President Bush in 2003, has the laudable goal of funding HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, its rigid emphasis on abstinence-only programs has dangerous consequences. For example, by promoting abstinence and marriage as guaranteed protection from the virus in cultures where the very structure of marriage is based on gender inequality, PEPFAR programs deprive women and girls of prevention strategies that are, literally, lifesaving.

Abstinence-only programs in the U.S. and worldwide are facing increasing scrutiny by state and national governments, public health experts, women's rights advocates, the human rights community, and concerned parents and teens. The report concludes by looking ahead and surveying efforts nationwide to stop federal and state governments from funding such ineffective and dangerous programs and instead focus on ensuring that young people receive accurate and complete sexual and reproductive health information and services.

# Executive Summary

In September 2006, Legal Momentum, in partnership with the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School and the Program on International Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, convened a roundtable of experts from a range of disciplines to discuss abstinence-only programs and their particular impact on women and girls. The daylong meeting was prompted by the dramatic increase in federal funding for these programs and the growing evidence that they are ineffective at best, and harmful at worst.

This report is the outgrowth of that meeting. It draws on the work of the experts who took part in the roundtable, broader academic research, and Legal Momentum's original research into the history, funding, and implementation of abstinence-only programs. This volume provides the most comprehensive report to date on the abstinence-only movement, and is the first extended inquiry into the gender harms of this approach to sexuality education.

The report begins by presenting the three major abstinence-only funding streams and reveals the political motivations behind their creation and the

conservative ideology underlying their guidelines. The law that governs federally funded abstinence-only programs requires them to teach that sex outside marriage, at any age and under any circumstances, is inherently dangerous and wrong. Abstaining from sexual activity until heterosexual marriage is presented as the only effective and acceptable way to prevent unwanted pregnancy and STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

The report describes how, despite consistent evidence demonstrating the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs, as well as mounting evidence of their harmful effects, these programs continue to receive unprecedented and increasing levels of government funding each year. Over \$1.5 billion in federal and state funding has been allocated for abstinence-only programs since they began in 1982, and funding has skyrocketed under the Bush administration.

Chapter 2 documents how government resources are increasingly being allocated to inexperienced, ideologically motivated, conservative, and anti-abortion groups while, in contrast, comprehensive sex education programs have been effectively

- how abstinence-only programs and policies conflict with human rights norms and endanger the rights and well-being of individuals and groups, particularly LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) individuals;
- how effective alternatives to abstinence-only programs and policies could be designed and implemented.

As the above list illustrates, the need for accurate, effective, and high-quality sexuality education, free from the bias and political ideology that drives abstinence-only programs, is clear. Teenagers need honest and comprehensive information about the

risks of sexual activity—and how to responsibly handle those risks when they do decide to become sexually active. Young women and girls in particular need to be empowered with positive messages and accurate information that give them the confidence and ability to make healthy and informed sexual and relationship choices throughout their lives.

A goal of this report is to begin making more of these positive messages possible by exposing the harmful messages of abstinence-only education. Exposing these harms takes us in a new and essential direction in educating our youth about their reproductive and sexual health.

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