

## Nadine Dorries' abstinence sex education is bad policy: young women need sex-positive sex education



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Conservative MP Nadine Dorries' **proposed amendment** to Bill 185 on sex education is set to go through Parliament for a second reading on January 20<sup>th</sup>. 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” (transcript of the debate, dated May 4<sup>th</sup> 2011, can be found [here](#)). While Dorries' concerns over Britain's high teen pregnancy rates and 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, downright moronic 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 behavior is a shameful tactic of victim blaming, i.e. giving these children ultimate responsibility for all sexual acts that happen to them – consensual or not – and 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 – namely 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 **13.33%** between 1999 and 2008, and are currently at their lowest rate since the early 1980s. It remains that 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?

Then again, it wouldn't be the first time that Nadine Dorries has stirred controversy over her stance on women's rights. Her **amendments** to the Health and Social Care bill, defeated in the Commons last September, would have opened the door to faith-based abortion counselling whilst forbidding abortion providers to impart any information. She also campaigned, back in 2006 and 2008, for tighter limits to abortion. The review of Sex and Relationship Education, as part of the broader review of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) by the Ministry of Education, has also been **cause for concern** as the Council launched last May featured a panel composed of several religious and pro-life organizations.

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".

A protest has been organized on January 20<sup>th</sup>, from 10:30 am to 12:30pm, in front of Parliament: **Facebook event**.

*Editors note (13:29, 20 January 2012): On Friday, 20 January, Dorries' amendment **was withdrawn**. According to the Guardian:*

*A spokeswoman for the Commons information office said it might be rescheduled for another day, but for now had been "removed from effective orders".*

*The Guardian called Dorries, but the MP said she was too busy to speak or explain why the bill had been removed.*

*The bill is likely to have been withdrawn by Dorries herself. "No one would be able to remove a private members' bill without the permission of a member," the Commons information office spokeswoman said.*

*The bill was eighth on Friday's list of private members' bills, meaning it was very unlikely to have been heard.*

*Dorries's sex education (required content) bill had angered feminists, humanists and pro-choice activists, hundreds of whom staged a demonstration outside parliament on Friday morning.*

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January 19th, 2012 | [Politics, Society](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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