

# Unbuckling Purity Culture's Chastity Belt

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*Many Christians in the United States are taught from an early age the importance of remaining sexually 'pure' for God, their future spouses, and their families. This emphasis on sexual morality emerges out of a movement immersed in the biblical doctrine of purity. "Purity culture" is the term used for evangelical movements that promote a biblical view of 'sexual purity' by discouraging 'traditional' forms of dating, promoting virginity before marriage, and supporting only heterosexual, married, and monogamous forms of sexual activity. This paper explores how purity culture emerged in the United States as evangelical reaction to the 'sexual immorality' of free love, pro-choice, and birth control activism during the Sexual Revolution, as well as how the movement has been successful in implementing abstinence programming in public schools and reforming sexuality in the United States. Furthermore, it argues that the messages and signals of purity culture being sent to youth via the purity, abstinence-only education in institutions, and mass appeal of purity culture in popular culture has produced a system in which virginity is made real and tangible. Therefore, this paper ultimately argues that purity culture has successfully attached itself to the idea of virginity to make it serve a political purpose.*

When Becca Andrews told her boyfriend “don’t” in his Tennessee college dorm room, he still did anyway.<sup>1</sup> She knew what had happened to her was wrong, but she could not admit it to herself. Since Becca’s understanding of sex and sexuality was informed by her Methodist upbringing and her experience in a ministry during university, she saw her role as a woman to be that of a “sexual gatekeeper”—God burdened men with “insatiable lust”—making her responsible for the sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians, particularly evangelicals like Becca, are taught from an early age the importance of remaining “pure” for God, their future spouses, and their families.<sup>3</sup> These teachings, however, are not limited to the fundamentalism of evangelical-Christianity

1 Becca Andrews, “Sins of Submission,” *Mother Jones* 43 no.5 (September 2018): 58, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=131040662&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

2 *Ibid.*, 58.

3 *Ibid.*

alone. Rather, they are present in culture at large, manifesting in abstinence-only public-school sex education as well as the slut/virgin dichotomy. This emphasis on sexual morality emerges out of a movement immersed in the biblical doctrine of purity known as “purity culture.” To understand how purity culture influenced Becca to believe that her sexual assault was her own fault, it is necessary to explore purity culture’s history, political traction, and pervasion of popular culture.

“Purity culture” is a term applied to Christian-evangelical movements that attempt to promote a biblical view of ‘sexual purity’ by discouraging ‘traditional’ forms of dating, promoting virginity before marriage, and supporting heterosexual, married, and monogamous forms of sexual activity. Biblical scripture supports the Christian-evangelical movement’s understanding of ‘sexual purity’ often citing “lust”—a sexual craving of something forbidden by God—as a primary problem.<sup>4</sup> Remaining ‘pure’ is not only abstaining from sexual activities, but from sexual thoughts as well. For some evangelicals, the consequences of falling victim to lust via sexual immorality range anywhere from disappointing God to marriage problems, drug use, prostitution, becoming a sexual predator, and death.<sup>5</sup> Virginity, therefore, is seen as something to be protected and valued in the face of sexual immorality—saving one’s self for marriage being of utmost importance in ensuring sexual purity, morality, health, and safety. Thus, the culture puts emphasis on prevention of sexual immorality and the protection of virginity through abstinence-only sexual education programs, including tools and practices such as “purity pledges,” “purity rings,” and “purity balls,” as well as different forms of popular media to get their followers to commit to sexual purity.<sup>6</sup>

Teachings of sexual purity and practices that put sexuality in the face of God and the family lead to the emergence of common themes such as “the belief that sex devalues women; men and women were created for different, complementary purposes; sex should only be for procreation; women are responsible for sexual violence that men perpetrate; women should expect and accept sexual violence as a normal part of life; and women who are not submissive should be derogated.”<sup>7</sup>

4 Kailla Edger, “Evangelicalism, Sexual Morality, and Sexual Addiction: Opposing Views and Continued Conflicts,” *Journal of Religion & Health* 51, no. 1 (March 2012): 164, doi:10.1007/s10943-010-9338-7.

5 *Ibid.*, 164.

6 Elizabeth Gish, “Producing High Priests and Princesses: The Father-Daughter Relationship in the Christian Sexual Purity Movement,” *Religions* 7, no. 3 (March 2016): 3, doi:10.3390/rel7030033.

7 Kathryn Klement and Brad Sagarin, “Nobody Wants to Date a Whore: Rape-Supportive Messages in Women-Directed Christian Dating Books,” *Sexuality & Culture* 21, no. 1 (March 2017): 205, doi:10.1007/s12119-016-9390-x.

People who encounter this belief system are led to believe that women are responsible for men's sexual sin and should not have sexual desire or enjoy sex as much as men. In addition, bodies are seen as something to be ashamed of, virginity is thought to be the only thing of worth in people, and sexual abuse is regarded as being the equivalent of sex before marriage. This belief system raises an important question: who would willingly participate in a culture that is scientifically inaccurate, psychologically distressing, and is generally toxic to broader society? The answer rests with evangelical-Christians and their efforts to make people unknowingly and unwillingly participate in this belief system.

In the United States, evangelicalism refers to an umbrella group of Protestant Christians.<sup>8</sup> As Kailla Edger outlines, evangelical-Christians participate in “dozens of different denominations, some of which even oppose each other.”<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, she argues that “the denomination of evangelicals does not exist . . . because evangelicalism is a movement that has no formal constitutional guidelines for faith and practice.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, other theorists, such as Paul F. Knitter, Douglas A. Sweeney, Alister McGrath, and David V. Barrett, outline characteristics that are typically understood to be “universal” within evangelical-Christianity, such as the “absolute authority of the Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and how to live a Christian life . . . [and] the need to evangelize both individually and as a church.”<sup>11</sup> By adhering to these principles, purity culture emerges out of evangelical-Christianity as a literal interpretation of scripture about sex and sexuality as well as a movement dedicated to proselytizing a message of sexual purity to those who are not Christian converts. It is important to note, however, that since there is a variety of evangelical-Christianity movements and various practices and disciplines within each sect, one cannot conclude that all evangelical-Christians either practice, adhere to, or even believe in purity culture. Rather, the messages of purity culture resonate throughout churches and broader society in general in different shapes and forms—even in many progressive Christian communities.

In the same way that there is no one church that can be attributed to creating and implementing purity culture, there is no one time period that can be attributed to its creation. Rather, there have been many different forms of biblical sexual regulation and virginity sanctification

throughout history in various cultures, religions, and traditions.<sup>12</sup> What Western societies have come to know as purity culture today, however, can be traced back to the rise of evangelical-Christians and the “Christian Right” in 1960s and 1970s America.<sup>13</sup> In her article, Edger discusses how the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s shaped and reshaped America's culture, including the evangelical belief system, by challenging the value and sanctity of religious institutions, theological traditions, and belief systems in general.<sup>14</sup> She argues that purity culture was ironically born out of the sexual revolution of the 1960s—an evangelical reaction to the ‘sexual immorality’ of free love, pro-choice, and birth control activism.<sup>15</sup> While these secular movements tried to broaden sexuality beyond the confines of marriage and religion, evangelicals fought back with their views about the deep meaning of sexual acts, the importance of keeping them within the context of marriage and heterosexuality, and the idea that monogamy is intended by “God's divine purpose.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, purity culture and its subsequent movements arose out of evangelical circles as a reactionary response to the rapidly changing views of sex, marriage, and identity in an increasingly modern society.

Although it emerged out of the sexual revolution, purity culture was able to attach itself to other issues that arose after the 1960s sexual revolution, including the issue of abortion during *Roe v. Wade*, the anti-pornography feminist activism of the 1970s, the pedophilia and child pornography scares, as well as the HIV/AIDS crisis in the context of LGBTQ+ activism during the 1980s. To this, theorist Sara Moslener argues that “evangelical Protestants have sought cultural and political influence by asserting sexual purity in the face of national insecurity, namely [in] threats of civilizational decline and race suicide” by jumping on themes of sexual immorality and a loss of innocence in the 1960s sexual revolution, as well as themes of juvenile delinquency emerging from a budding post-WWII youth culture within fundamentalist and later neo-evangelical circles.<sup>17</sup> Purity culture can then also be attributed to various moral panics and the morality politics born out of the post-Cold War era—bred out of fears of national decline from

8 Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 3, [https://books.google.ca/books?id=Wxm-LDgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=Wxm-LDgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false).

9 Edger, “Evangelicalism, Sexual Morality, and Sexual Addiction: Opposing Views and Continued Conflicts,” 163.

10 Ibid., 163.

11 Ibid.

12 Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), <http://readsbookonline.com/virgin-the-untouched-history-f>.

13 Edger, “Evangelicalism, Sexual Morality, and Sexual Addiction: Opposing Views and Continued Conflicts,” 164-165.

14 Ibid., 164.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Sara Moslener, “It's Like Playing with a Nuclear Bomb,” *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (September 2012): 254, doi:10.1179/1355835813Z.00000000018.

post-war fundamentalism.<sup>18</sup> Morality politics pertain to personal and private issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and pornography, with the policy conflict being moral rather than material.<sup>19</sup> Moral policies born out of morality politics specifically attempt to change individuals and their behaviors using either financial incentives, legal sanctions, or societal norms.<sup>20</sup> Purity culture and its movements play on these very ideas by making appeals directly to parents and adolescents about the need to teach abstinence within their communities.<sup>21</sup> Through piggybacking their ideas of sexual purity on the various moral panics and morality politics of each decade, purity culture asserted itself into the dominant culture by attaching itself to current issues.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of achieving political success by using momentum from various moral panics, politics, and national identity issues, Gayle Rubin argues that “[r]ight-wing opposition to sex education, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, and pre-marital sex moved from the extreme fringes to the political center stage after 1977, when right-wing strategists and fundamentalist religious crusaders discovered that these issues had mass appeal.”<sup>23</sup> Evangelicals then tied issues of sexuality purity and abstinence to broader social concerns, linking it to ‘family values,’ anti-abortion, and birth control issues.<sup>24</sup> As a result, over the years, the evangelical movements that support purity culture have been successful in advocating abstinence-only sex education in public schools as well as creating and implementing single-issue organizations dedicated to promoting abstinence and reforming sexuality in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

As outlined by Jean Calterone Williams, supporters of purity culture campaigned to promote abstinence as a form of birth control and began to gain political leverage in the United States in the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> These efforts saw significant national legislative success in 1996 as a part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity

Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) with a \$250 million grant for abstinence-only sex education.<sup>27</sup> This funding became known as “Title V” funding, which increased by over \$200 million between 2000 and 2009, and went towards programs like The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) and Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE).<sup>28</sup> These programs have supported and funded the teaching of abstinence-only sex education in public schools, youth groups, and to teens across the United States through both live and web-based programs.<sup>29</sup> Purity culture was thus cemented as a legitimate form of social control and as a management system in which moral panics could be quelled.

Purity culture’s recent “boom” can be attributed to the accumulation of educational acts, “Title V” funding, and emergence of organizations such as *True Love Waits*, *Silver Ring Thing*, and *Focus on the Family*, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These organizations have specifically targeted teenagers and young adults into participating in abstinence-based programs by inserting purity culture and beliefs into mainstream formats. Realizing purity culture could be a lucrative endeavour, these groups launched rallies, concerts, events, and merchandise<sup>30</sup> to “literally sell sexual purity.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, in recent years, many books, movies, and TV programs have been created about the subject, including *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris and *Sex, Purity, and the Longings of a Girl’s Heart* by YouTubers Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal of *GirlDefined*. This commodification of purity culture has, in a way, oversaturated the market with a wealth of materials. It is only logical that some of these materials would break out of the confines of the fundamentalism and fringes in which they were born and make their way into broader, more mainstream society since they are being promoted and legitimized by an education system that also actively supports their ideas. Therefore, purity culture’s piggybacking on the social issues of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to achieve funding for abstinence-only sexual education, the implementation of abstinence-only sexual education in schools in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the commodification of such issues in recent years has led to its pervasion into the standards and norms of mainstream American culture.

The messages and signals of purity culture that are sent to youth via the religious indoctrination of purity, abstinence-only education in institutions, and popular culture produced a system in which virginity

18 Ibid., 254-255.

19 Jean Calterone Williams, “Battling a ‘Sex-Saturated Society’: The Abstinence Movement and the Politics of Sex Education,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (August 2011): 420, doi:10.1177/1363460711406460.

20 Ibid., 420.

21 Ibid., 421.

22 Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” in Carole Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger* (1984): 3-18, [https://coursespaces.uvic.ca/pluginfile.php/2077036/mod\\_resource/content/1/02\\_Rubin\\_Gayle\\_ThinkingSex.pdf](https://coursespaces.uvic.ca/pluginfile.php/2077036/mod_resource/content/1/02_Rubin_Gayle_ThinkingSex.pdf).

23 Ibid., 8.

24 Williams, “Battling a ‘Sex-Saturated Society’: The Abstinence Movement and the Politics of Sex Education,” 422.

25 Ibid., 417.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 417-418.

29 Ibid., 418.

30 Andrews, “Sins of Submission,” 58.

31 Gish, “Producing High Priests and Princesses: The Father-Daughter Relationship in the Christian Sexual Purity Movement,” 3.

was made real and tangible—as something to be protected morally and materially. Thus, for many people—even those outside of evangelical circles—morality becomes synonymous with virginity. For example, Maura Kelly outlines that in popular teen drama TV programs, themes surrounding virginity loss such as “virginity as a gift,” “the positive consequences for maintaining virginity,” “the physical, mental, and social dangers of sex,” “virginity as a rite of passage,” “emphasis on ‘appropriate’ virginity loss,” as well as the “positive consequences when sex is ‘appropriate’ and the negative consequences when the sex is ‘inappropriate’” are prominent.<sup>32</sup> Since these themes are presented in educational institutions, popular culture and media, as well as in the attitudes of people and society, virginity and purity have become one and the same. The effect that this equation has had on people can be seen in Becca Andrews’ story.

Becca Andrews believed she had done something fundamentally wrong when she was raped; she thought she had engaged in sexual activity before marriage, and, therefore, had compromised her sexual purity. An indoctrination of biblical purity during childhood and adolescence, education based in sexual abstinence, and immersion into a culture that devalues people for having premarital sex bring a lifetime of shame and guilt to people like Becca. Pain and suffering have been the result of an idea—not something tangible and material. How does society change this? Providing an answer to this question, Becca stated, “I cannot count on the culture that enabled my assault to change in a way that satisfies me, but maybe if I scream loud enough I can use my pain to protect others.”<sup>33</sup> It can be a daunting task to begin to change a culture that has been so deeply ingrained into the psyche of its inhabitants. Real, concrete societal change may perhaps start with the sharing of stories, acceptance of others’ experiences, and the building of a supportive community. Becca’s story does not have to be the story of so many people. If we can expose purity culture for what it is, who is behind it, and how people have been unwilling participants, society can build a reactionary movement to its pervasiveness, toxicity, and trauma.

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<sup>32</sup> Maura Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives in ‘Teen Drama’ Television Programs,” *Journal of Sex Research* 47(5) (2010): 482.

<sup>33</sup> Andrews, “Sins of Submission,” 60.