

Why It's Time to Stop Mocking Sex Education that Teaches 'Just Say No'

Sometime in the not too distant past a high school girl posted the following plea on a Viacom platform called A Thin Line, whose purpose was to get teenagers to share their digital dramas: *ok this one guy my so called best friend keeps pressuring me to send him a nude picture when ever i can. I love him and all but I don't wanna sext. He also wants me to have sex like everyday. Idk what to do anymore. Help?*

Her story was one of over 7000 posted on the site between March 2010 and January 2016. A sample of 462 girls from this group was analysed in a study [published](#) last December under the heading, ‘“What Should I Do?”: Young Women’s Reported Dilemmas with Nude Photographs’.

Researcher Sara E. Thomas, from the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University in Illinois, reported that more than two-thirds of the “young women” (median age 15) experienced an “ongoing struggle” in their interpersonal relationships because of pressure – almost exclusively from boys – to send nude photos of themselves over the internet.

They were worried about the consequences: about their parents, their self-esteem (“What sort of a person am I that he would ask me this?”), about “morals” in some cases, but above all, about losing a boyfriend – whom several purported to “love” despite his aggressive and even threatening messages. Although some ended up refusing, only three girls in the whole sample “articulated a long-term vision of themselves” in marriage or a serious relationship later on.

For decades, sexual progressives have ridiculed sex education for teens that focuses on abstinence until marriage, or

“saying no”, but it becomes more and more obvious that “no” is the one word that young people most need to practise. When a 14-year-old (quoted in the study) writes of her boyfriend’s demands, *The stuff I have to do is unbelievable*, she clearly lacks a fundamental skill – and it’s not how to put a condom on him.

Eric Schneiderman and the victimisation of ‘strong’ women

But it is not just adolescent girls who don’t know how to say “no” – and act on it. #MeToo revelations suggest that many mature, educated and otherwise successful women have found themselves yielding to pressure from cads and bullies. They have suffered indignities and even physical harm at the hands of such men when, conceivably, they could have walked out on him at the very first “grope” or threat of violence.

Last week’s distressing testimonies from four women about their abusive relationships or encounters with former New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman are startling examples of this phenomenon. According to a [lengthy expose](#) by Jane Mayer and Ronan Farrow in *The New Yorker* magazine, the two identified women are both “articulate, progressive Democratic feminists in their forties who live in Manhattan.” Independent women, you would think, who would not let themselves be bullied by a progressive, feminist, Democratic man. Sadly, they did.

Michelle Manning Barish, a divorced single mother with a young daughter, and a political activist, met Schneiderman, also divorced, through some of her socially prominent friends mid-2013, and “fell quickly” for him. They started dating and – soon? – became physically involved. About four weeks after that, however, he became violent after they had been drinking together and were preparing for bed. He verbally abused her, calling her a “whore,” and she answered back. Then, unexpectedly, he slapped her “with great force, across the face, landing the blow directly onto my ear,” she told the New

Yorker. The he choked her.

(This behaviour, or his version of it, has been described by Schneiderman as “role playing”. The New Yorker describes it as “non-consensual physical violence”.)

Manning Barish was crying and in shock, and soon after left Schneiderman’s apartment, telling him she would never come back. But before long, and despite ongoing trouble with her ear, they reconciled, and two years later she was still seeing him, at least intermittently, after three break-ups. The intervening months were marked by his controlling tactics, verbal abuse, mockery of her work, forcing her to drink alcohol with him, rough treatment and threats to kill her if she left him. Manning Barish lost 30 pounds and her hair was falling out.

She could have prevented nearly all of that if she had stuck to her first instinct – never to go near him again.

Tanya Selvaratnam, the second named woman in the *New Yorker* article, is a Sri Lankan born author, actor, film producer, feminist and, like Manning Barish, divorced. Her relationship with Schneiderman, which began in 2016, was equally characterised by “abusive, demeaning [he called her his ‘brown slave’], threatening behaviour,” and yet she stayed with him for over a year, all but living at his apartment. In her case too, there were threats to kill, have her followed and her phone tapped if she left him. She too was in physically poor shape by the time she cut loose from him.

A third, anonymous woman also had an abusive relationship with Schneiderman around that time, while a fourth, a prominent New York lawyer, after apparently only one encounter with him in which he tried the smack-across-the-face treatment on her, did not go back for more.

Why did the other women – described as “strong” and “independent” – keep up their relationship with a man who, if

all they say is true, is a drunken, violent, sexually perverted and monstrously hypocritical (Schneiderman is a champion of #MeToo) egotist? Why did they not slam the door on him after the first beating, and leave it shut?

He was a powerful man, to be sure, who could harm them socially as well as physically and emotionally, but that power only increased the longer they stayed. Other reasons suggest themselves, including the benefits of being the partner – or even wife, as expected at one stage in the case of Manning Barish – of such a powerful man, and hope of reforming him.

Remedies: is legalism enough?

The more important question, now, is whether the remedies for sexual abuse and harassment of women proposed recently – by Schneiderman himself, among others – are sufficient to protect women, when even women closest to the “patriarchal power” structures suffer under them and do not report physical violence and death threats.

So far, we have heard much about tightening laws, about rules for workplaces and protocols for consent in sexual relationships. Women have been encouraged to complain about any form of sexual harassment, and authorities ordered to take every complaint seriously. Teenagers are being taught that they are entitled to a sexual relationship but that it must be governed by [consent](#) at every step (“only yes means yes”).

Will that put things right for the teenage girls who don’t really want to sext? Or for the strong, independent women who find themselves attached to a sadist?

Isn’t the new sexual legalism rather the path to an Islamic-style solution, with relations between men and women controlled externally by a multitude of rules that effectively segregate the sexes (and don’t we see this drawing apart of men and women happening before our eyes?) without increasing mutual respect or personal virtue?

In truth, it is only virtue that can lift our current sexual culture out of the pigsty of porn-inspired “role-playing” and make it really safe for women. We cannot make our “yes” mean yes, and our “no” mean no without cultivating the habit of saying “no” to what is bad for ourselves (and others) and “yes” to what is good, in all areas of life.

When it is a question of sex outside of marital commitment, “no” should be the default setting, and women, for their own sakes, need to say it clearly and assertively from the first sign that he is looking for “yes”. Of course, this will continue to be [scorned](#) by the Manhattan set; and feminists will be outraged at the suggestion that women need to do anything about sexual harassment other than “speak out”. But what is the alternative – the burqa?

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