
Chapter Title: A Right to Knowledge? Culture, Diversity, and Sex Education in the Age of AIDS, 1984–2010

Book Title: Too Hot to Handle

Book Subtitle: A Global History of Sex Education

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Published by: Princeton University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1djmhcf.8>

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CHAPTER FOUR

A Right to Knowledge? Culture, Diversity, and Sex Education in the Age of AIDS, 1984– 2010

In September 1994, twenty thousand delegates gathered in Cairo, Egypt, for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Discarding the family-planning model that had marked most such meetings since the 1960s, the conference adopted a new emphasis on “reproductive rights.” All human beings should be able to choose when and how they reproduced, the convention resolved; to make informed choices, they also needed access to sex education from the beginning of their reproductive years. “Information and services should be made available to adolescents to help them understand their sexuality,” the ICPD declared. “This should be combined with the education of young men to respect women’s self-determination and to share responsibility with women in matters of sexuality and reproduction.” Scandinavians took the lead in promoting this rights-based approach at the meeting, which heard opening-day speeches from the Norwegian prime minister and from Denmark’s minister for overseas development. The resolutions also represented a triumph for American officials at the Ford Foundation, who laid the groundwork for the ICPD by funding local Egyptian groups to “raise awareness” of sex education and especially AIDS. Sex education was “the only available protection” against AIDS, one Egyptian grant recipient noted. It would also help combat “sex perversion,” he added, particularly homosexuality.¹

Yet the final comment also underscored the limits of consensus at the ICPD. Egypt would eventually join with four other majority-Muslim countries in denouncing the idea of “individual” rights to

sexual knowledge and self-determination; such a claim “could be interpreted as applying to sexual relations outside the framework of marriage,” an Iranian delegate explained, “and this is totally unacceptable.” Two mostly Catholic countries (El Salvador and Guatemala) also issued dissents from the resolutions, as did the delegation from the Vatican; earlier in the year, Philippines cardinal Jaime Sin called on Catholics to reject the ICPD along with “the shackles of this new global citizenship.” The conference also heard a stinging rebuke from Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto, who reiterated her support for population control even as she condemned Western leaders for pushing their own libertinism on the conservative East. “This conference must not be viewed by the teeming masses of the world as a universal social charter seeking to impose adultery, abortion, sex education and other such matters on individuals, societies, and religions which have their own social ethos,” Bhutto warned. “The world needs consensus. It does not need a clash of cultures.”²

It got one, anyway, although not the kind that Bhutto imagined. Two years after he declared a “cultural war” in the United States at the Republican National Convention, right-wing columnist Pat Buchanan proclaimed that the ICPD had united conservatives across borders—indeed, across cultures. “While this may be a bold agenda at Washington dinner parties, to traditional societies in Latin America, Africa and the Islamic world, it is the essence of decadent, godless Western materialism,” Buchanan wrote, condemning the Cairo resolutions. Prior to the ICPD, Vatican officials met with representatives of the World Muslim League and other Islamic groups; in a joint statement, they condemned the “extreme individualism” and “moral decadence” of the conference. The papal envoy in Teheran also met with Iranian officials, who declared their “full endorsement” for the Vatican in its battle against the ICPD. As an Islamic leader in the United Kingdom wrote three years later, the Cairo controversy generated a “common platform” with “like-minded non-Muslim faith groups.” It also emboldened them to challenge school officials, who had stepped up sex education in the face of the AIDS crisis. “Both sides—the authorities as well as the community—speak of promoting ‘the moral,’” the Muslim leader wrote. “Whose morals is the child going to subscribe to?”³

The same question had surrounded sex education since its inception, of course. But it assumed a new meaning and urgency in the age of AIDS, which made most governments adopt some kind of school-based sex instruction. Suddenly, the question was no longer whether schools would teach about sex; it was what they would teach, and how, and to what end. Abandoning their long-standing opposition to the subject, conservative Christian activists in the West backed new forms of “abstinence-only” sex education. They also made common cause with different faith groups, at home and overseas, belying the popular notion of a “clash of cultures” between them. The real conflict pitted liberal and secular voices against the Global Right, which rallied religious conservatives behind older notions of sexual continence and obedience. For their own part, liberals struggled to respect ethnic and religious “diversity” even as they proclaimed a universal right to sexual choice and information. “How can a sexuality, reproduction and health perspective based on individual rights become a global norm?” a Swedish educator wondered in 2004, on the ten-year anniversary of the Cairo conference. Sadly, the Swede admitted, large parts of the globe still resisted that viewpoint. In an age of diversity, a single shared standard of sex education—or, even a personal “right” to the same—remained a chimera.⁴

THE AIDS CRISIS AND SEX EDUCATION, I: EUROPE AND THE USA

In 1987, US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop traveled to Japan to address a conference on HIV/AIDS. A leader in the effort to combat the disease back home, Koop was shocked when the Japanese Minister of Health raised a glass of sake in honor of his American guest and said, “AIDS, no problem in Japan.” Koop bluntly replied that AIDS *was* a problem there, noting that businessmen consorted with prostitutes in Hawaii and then returned to Japan to infect their wives with HIV. And just as in America, he added, the only way to fight AIDS was via education. To be sure, Koop added, “lack of understanding and official denial” hampered AIDS prevention everywhere; in the United States, for example, his 1986 report on AIDS—

calling on schools to start teaching about it in the third grade—had triggered outrage among his fellow conservatives, and even a few death threats against Koop himself. But that was all the more reason to press forward, he argued, citing the Hippocratic oath that was administered to physicians around the world. “We will not abandon the sick or disabled, whoever they are,” Koop declared, “or however they got their problem.” He added a jab at “homophobia” in Japan, although—as he later admitted—he also feared that his words “were falling on deaf ears.”⁵

Koop might have been right. Nearly two decades later, Japanese textbooks took pains to debunk “myths” about AIDS—it wasn’t spread by mosquito bites or by shaking hands, for example—but remained silent about how it *was* transmitted, and about who was suffering from it. But even these elliptical remarks represented a much more explicit discussion than what had been taught under Japanese “Purity Education,” which had since assumed a more common name: sex education. Elsewhere, the subject continued to appear under older euphemisms—especially family life education and population education—and added a few new ones, including “adolescent reproductive health” and “life skills.” As before, many of these names were designed to mask, downplay, or avoid sex-related content. But in the age of HIV/AIDS, such content increased—both in detail and in volume—in almost every corner of the globe. Not surprisingly, much of this instruction simply warned young people against having sex. On the one hand, an American educator wrote in 1996, the spread of HIV/AIDS helped erode “the taboo surrounding sexuality” in schools; on the other, it also reinforced traditional notions about it. Most sex education still focused on “the biology of sexuality” and on “controlling sexual activity through fear,” the American educator wrote, reviewing several new initiatives overseas.⁶

The same was true in the United States, where a burst of new sex education laws and policies bore a distinctly conservative flavor. In 1986, when Koop released his AIDS report, just three states and the District of Columbia mandated sex education; by 1992, all but four states required or recommended it. These years also witnessed the rise of so-called abstinence-only sex education, fueled by federal measures that provided funds for the same. By 1999 one in three Amer-

ican school districts was using an abstinence-only curriculum like *Sex Respect*, which touted the idea of “secondary virginity”: even if you had already had sex, you could reclaim virgin status by abstaining until marriage. It also issued controversial—and mostly flawed—data about condom failure, insisting that “safe sex” was a contradiction in terms. “There’s another good reason not to have sex,” the curriculum’s creator told an interviewer in a news report she sent to C. Everett Koop. “You can die.” Koop himself recommended abstinence outside of marriage but also argued for teaching students about condoms and even anal sex, so they knew how to protect themselves; as he told a reporter, “you can’t talk about the dangers of snake poisoning and not mention snakes.” His position drove a wedge into the Republican Party and created political headaches for President Ronald Reagan, who blithely announced that he had neither read Koop’s HIV/AIDS report nor spoken to him about it. But it also underscored the limits of sex education in the era of AIDS; even in a plea for abstinence, there was only so much sexual information that Americans would allow their children to receive.⁷

In the United Kingdom, likewise, HIV/AIDS sparked a spike in both sex education and the squabbles surrounding it. In 1986, under pressure from Conservatives in Parliament, the government made local education authorities responsible for sex education and also declared that parents could exempt their children from it. When the Education Department issued a pamphlet the following year to guide instruction about AIDS, it emphasized that such instruction remained optional for schools and families alike; in the classroom, meanwhile, many teachers continued to avoid sex education for fear of offending local officials and parents. But it clearly received more attention than ever before; as in the United States, one British educator observed, the question became “how sex education is carried out and not whether it is carried out.” A 1996 measure required sex education for all high school students—subject to parental right of withdrawal—but added that it should be taught “in such a manner as to encourage those pupils to have due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life.” In 2000, yet another law declared that students should also be “protected from teaching materials which are inappropriate to [their] religious and cultural background.” As

another educator noted, these mandates made schools “walk a fine line”; stressing the value of family and morality, they also had to respect the varied moralities of different families.⁸

In the more liberal societies of northern Europe, meanwhile, HIV/AIDS brought renewed and often highly explicit attention to safe-sex practices. In the Netherlands, a popular television news program for children staged a condom demonstration on a model of an erect penis; a Danish cartoon book showed “Oda and Ole” making love, using a condom; Finnish authorities sent a sex education leaflet and a condom to all adolescents on their sixteenth birthdays; and in Sweden, teachers passed around condoms in class and urged students to experiment with them. “Take these home and masturbate with them on, so you can see which kinds feel good and what kind you like,” one teacher told the boys in her charge. “And girls, you too take some home and open them up and handle them and make sure that you feel comfortable with them, so you won’t feel shy when the time comes to put them on your boyfriends.” Elsewhere in Europe, finally, countries that had formerly resisted or sharply restricted sex education found that they could no longer do so. Ireland issued its first sex education guidelines in 1987, cautioning that “such education should not be secular and would require religious input”; Poland developed a sex education syllabus to delay sexual debut and promote marital fidelity, which would both allegedly help control AIDS; and in France, minister for education and future presidential candidate Ségolène Royal launched a campaign to distribute a “pocket guide to contraception” in the schools. Across Europe and around the globe, a 1997 United Nations study observed, the spread of HIV/AIDS had “convinced otherwise reluctant governments” to institute—or to expand—sex education.⁹

THE AIDS CRISIS AND SEX EDUCATION, II: THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The starkest change occurred in the so-called developing world, especially in the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic: Africa. By 2004, 80 percent of people living with AIDS were between fifteen and twenty-

four years of age; three-quarters of them lived in Africa, where 70 percent of children entered primary school and two-thirds of those children reached the fifth grade. So schools represented “the single location where the largest proportion of young people can be reached,” as two African health specialists wrote. Countries that had formerly taught “population education”—with only a smattering of sex-related information—began to teach much more explicitly about the subject, often supplanting families and other traditional modes of socialization. “In a changing modern world, parents need help with this formidable task,” noted one observer in Botswana, where AIDS and divorce had spawned a dramatic increase in single-parent households. “The stable, predictable world is gone.” Botswanan schools integrated material about sex and HIV/AIDS into science, home economics, and religious education; so did Kenya, which also taught the subject via geography, history, civics, Swahili, and math. “A hospital had 35 inpatients tested for HIV,” one math teacher told his class, in a typical word problem. “Ten percent of these were HIV-negative. How many were HIV positive?” Whatever their subject, almost all such lessons ended with the same advice: abstinence, except in marriage. “If children are ‘taught’ that it is OK for them to change partners and fall into bed when the emotions move them (provided they use a condom!), what hope is there for that young person ... ever to form a firm lasting relationship based on mutual trust?” asked the minister of health in Zimbabwe, which barred “safe-sex” lessons from schools. “We have to promote *lasting, permanent marriage* since this is the only sound basis for the family, which in turn is the building block upon which the whole structure of the nation is based.”¹⁰

Echoing American abstinence-only organizations, other African countries warned about infertility—a hugely stigmatizing condition in many parts of the continent—and other potentially harmful consequences of sexual activity, particularly illegal abortions and HIV. More often, though, African schools condemned out-of-wedlock sex in moral and religious terms. “The biological aim is to present sex within a creative framework and to vindicate the existence of the Omnipotent and Omnipresent,” declared a school textbook in Ghana, where sex education was taught via social studies. “The religious

restrictions are strict but they protect the person from a lot of problems.” The textbook went on to cite biblical passages indicting fornication, masturbation, and “homosexuality and lesbianism.” To be sure, sexual relations represented a constant temptation for young people; quoting a popular Ghanaian proverb, the textbook acknowledged that “there is nothing on this earth which is as sweet as sex.” But that was precisely why schools needed to steel adolescents against it. Sexually active teens “become disrespectful, indulge in drug abuse, gambling, stealing, truancy, homosexuality, prostitution or promiscuity leading to contraction of HIV/AIDS, abortion, and death,” another textbook warned. A third text admonished students to resist Internet pornography, urging them to “turn to God in prayer” if they faltered; yet another book condemned parents who provided condoms to their children as protection against HIV/AIDS. “Our children are practicing fornication and we are conniving at this by giving them every encouragement,” the book blared.¹¹

Elsewhere in the developing world, sex education was less overtly moralistic. But nobody could miss its overall moral: no sex out of marriage. Some of the most sexually explicit instruction occurred in Iran, where curricula emphasized “the consent and readiness of the woman” and “the enjoyment of each partner.” But Iranians also stressed that such activity must be restricted to marital unions, echoing educators around the Third World. “By the rules of traditional religion, law and culture, a girl and boy must be a virgin,” a 1994 population education curriculum in the Philippines declared. “There must be no sex aside from your husband and wife.” Schools in India replaced population education with “Adolescent Education,” which provided more information about sex and especially HIV. But it also warned against “sexual indiscipline,” which educators blamed for “family and social disorganization, crimes, physical and mental diseases and widespread discontent, cruelties, miseries, and unhappiness.” In China, where educators had long ignored or resisted sex, a 1988 national directive on “Adolescence Education” instructed all schools to address it. Part of the impetus came from China’s one-child policy and its related effort to delay the age of marriage, which increased the likelihood of sex *before* marriage. The sex education initiative also aimed to counter “negative Western sexual culture”—

especially film and video—that flooded China in the 1980s and 1990s, as one educator wrote. Reinscribing abstinence and continence, sex education would provide a timely antidote to “the ‘sexual freedom’ of capitalism,” the educator added.¹²

Around the globe, non-Westerners promoted “corrective sex education”—as one Kenyan called it—as a check on the incursions of Western popular culture. The argument echoed early twentieth-century colonial officials, who promoted school-based sex instruction to challenge the sexual suggestiveness of imported books, magazines, and movies. Now the same cudgel was taken up by postcolonial educators, who feared that the “cultural invasion” of the West had “wreaked havoc on impressionable young minds,” as one Indian observer wrote; sex education would “clear misconceptions,” he added, and revive the “moral fibre of the child.” The danger increased with growing access to satellite television and especially the Internet, which made pornography easily available to millions of young people—even in highly monitored societies like China. “The ‘Great Firewall’ of Internet supervision is failing to serve its primary stated purpose,” a Chinese journalist wrote, noting the growing popularity of digital pornography among the young. But the same report underscored the slow development of sex education in Chinese schools, which continued to evade the subject well after they were directed to provide it. Although its advocates promoted sex education as a “fire extinguisher” against the blazes of “sexual liberation”—as another wry Chinese observer noted—many educators and parents rejected it as a symptom of that same libertine disease. Sex education is “a surrender to the dominance of the corrupt, ‘promiscuous West,’” a Lebanese critic wrote, noting that consultants from the United Nations had helped devise curricula for the subject.¹³

A GLOBAL “RIGHT” TO SEX EDUCATION?

Western and international experts often played key roles in the creation of new sex education programs in the developing world. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the West had worked closely with local allies since the 1940s to seed “grassroots” sex education

groups, even as they tried to disguise the Western role in cultivating them. In the era of AIDS, however, foreign NGOs increasingly offered direct aid and advice to state agencies and officials. With a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, for example, the Washington, DC-based Pan American Health Organization began a project in 1985 to develop curricula and train teachers for family life education in four Caribbean countries. Most of all, the project sought “to help children and young people to develop healthy attitudes and values about their sexuality,” as a curriculum guide stated. Prefiguring the 1994 Cairo conference, a 1986 teacher workshop highlighted the shared principle that undergirded this goal: sex as a basic right of every person, to determine and develop as he or she wished. “The individual should be able to see clearly what he wants to do and why and what he wants to avoid and why,” the Caribbean workshop declared. “Every human being is a unique individual with rights to freedom privacy, personal fulfillment, and the right to be treated as our equal.”¹⁴

This perspective was especially prominent in projects sponsored by Sweden, which became a global emblem of rights-centered sex education during these years. As in the 1960s and 1970s, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) hosted trainings and study tours that stressed the right of each individual to a “healthy sexual life,” as an appreciative Israeli visitor wrote in 1986. But the RFSU also accelerated its overseas activity, spurred by the murder of the Swedish prime minister, Olaf Palme—a longtime advocate for sex education around the world—as well as the centennial of the birth of RFSU founder Elise Ottesen-Jensen. Borrowing Ottesen-Jensen’s nickname, the RFSU launched an “Ottar Fund” to promote sex education in Kenya; over the next several years, the group would also start projects in Tanzania, Zambia, and Lithuania. Here it joined hands with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the government’s foreign-aid arm, which matched the private funds raised for Kenya and also sponsored sex education projects in Vietnam and Malawi. In the face of AIDS, Swedish educators stressed, it was not enough to change sexual behavior; the key was to alter sexual *attitudes*. “Whole nations have to be reoriented and retrained,” a 2004 SIDA publication declared. “Sex is Good—

Sex is Joy—Sex is Fun—Sex is Love—Sex is Power—Protected Sex is Life!”¹⁵

Other European countries promoted similar projects via their own NGOs and foreign-aid organizations, emphasizing sexual rights for all. Funded mainly by the German Technical Cooperation Agency, a 1996 “African Youth Conference on Sexual Health” in Ghana called for “comprehensive sexuality education at all levels.” Again, the focus was on changing values, beliefs, and attitudes—particularly about gender—so that individuals could determine their own sexual destinies. “On our continent and elsewhere, males are taught to be dominant, controlling, and unemotional, while females are encouraged to be subservient, dependent, and emotional,” a participant at the conference observed. “Young people have to change their attitudes and perceptions of each other as males and females.” By the mid-1990s, “positive, healthy sexuality for all people”—as a Ford Foundation document called it—had become the standard goal for international sex educators around the world. But in the United States, especially, educators who promoted that ideal overseas were forced to acknowledge that their own country fell far short of it; with the rise of abstinence-only education, America had arguably moved in the opposite direction. So Americans often cited a different country—Sweden—as the prime example of proper sex education, which the United States and the rest of humanity would be wise to follow. “Imagine a world,” an American sex educator wrote in 1990,

where: School sexuality education is compulsory. Contraceptives are readily available. Abortion is free until the 18th week of pregnancy. There is a law that states, “Cohabitation between people of the same sex is entirely acceptable from society’s point of view.” Teenage births and sexually transmitted diseases among teens are rare. Sound too good to be true? That world exists today in Sweden.¹⁶

The goal of sex education as a human right reached an apotheosis of sorts in 2008, when the International Planned Parenthood Federation issued its “Declaration on Sexual Rights.” Developed with funds from the Ford Foundation, the statement said that sexuality

was an “integral part of personhood,” and that “the pleasure deriving from it is a central aspect of being human.” As one observer noted, the idea of negative rights—that is, freedom from discrimination, violence, and coercion—was easily accepted by the IPPF membership. But positive rights—especially “self-expression and the pursuit of pleasure”—were “more contentious,” she added. The controversy would spill across front pages of the world the following year, when UNESCO released a draft report of its “International Guidelines on Sexuality Education.” Issued first in Sweden in June 2009, the guidelines echoed the now-standard assumptions that “sexuality extends from birth to death”—and that human beings at every age needed proper information to develop and determine it. Included were brief discussions of masturbation, abortion, and contraception, which drew the ire of conservative foes around the world. “This is like telling our kids not to smoke and yet providing them with cigarette filters,” a Singaporean critic complained. He went on to blast the “U.S.-centrism” of the UNESCO guidelines, which were authored by two American educators. In the United States, finally, conservatives blasted the guidelines as “culturally insensitive” toward minorities. “We think it’s a kind of one-size-fits-all approach that’s damaging to cultures, religions and to children,” one critic declared. In this new struggle, conservatives would sound the tocsin of multiculturalism and diversity. They would also join hands across cultural differences, creating a powerful new global force against sex education.¹⁷

DIVERSITY AND THE GLOBAL RIGHT, I: INTERNAL FERMENT

Since the 1960s, conservatives like Mary Whitehouse had forged alliances with like-minded critics of sex education across the West. But the new right-wing alliance linked activists around the globe, spurred by unpredicted—and unprecedented—population flows between the developing and developed worlds. Until the 1980s, as envious American educators frequently noted, most countries in Europe remained fairly homogenous. So they had the “luxury” of teaching sex education without inciting major parental or political objections,

as one reporter wrote in 1987. The comment understated the degree of dissent within purportedly “united” societies such as Denmark, where parental objections to school-based sex instruction had spawned the landmark *Kjeldsen* case in the 1970s. But it also ignored the fact that European societies were becoming immigrant hubs, rendering sex education far more controversial than it had ever been. This trend was also frequently overlooked by American sex educators, who were eager to contrast the heated controversies of US sex education with the supposed consensus that reigned in less diverse—and more “rational”—European countries. Following a 1998 study tour in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, for example, two Americans jealously reported that “religion and politics have little influence on policies related to adolescent sexuality”; indeed, all three countries regarded sex education as a “health issue,” not as a political one. The “overwhelming majority of the people” supported comprehensive sexuality education, including frank discussions of sexual practices and the ways to perform them safely.¹⁸

The report neglected the long history of parental resistance to sex education in France, especially, where a 2002 survey found that students received a grand total of two hours of instruction in the subject per year. Most of all, though, the Americans failed to notice the astounding growth of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in the supposedly “monocultural” societies of western Europe. Resistance to sex education was especially sharp inside Great Britain’s burgeoning Muslim community, which skyrocketed from half a million in 1981 to nearly three million in 2011. In 1994, the editor of Britain’s *Muslim Education Quarterly* blamed sex education on “the decadence of European civilization”; that same year, the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain resolved that Muslim children would be “better off without the sex education presently offered in state schools.” Echoing Islamic critics of the 1994 ICPD resolutions in Cairo, British Muslims complained that sex education violated a core principle of their faith: abstinence outside of marriage. “In Islam extra-marital sex is considered to be a dreadful sin,” *MEQ* editorialized in 1996. “Adultery is condemned by stoning to death ... and fornication among unmarried people is penalized by whipping.” Most of all, though, Muslims objected to the allegedly “value-free” philosophy of modern

sex education; by privileging “individual choice” about sex, schools insulted religious communities that did not leave such choices to the individual. Here Islamic critics echoed mainstream sex education opponents like Conservative leader Michael Howard, who noted the “natural ties of friendship, common outlook, and values” between Muslim and Christian conservatives.¹⁹

Elsewhere in the West, too, growing Muslim communities joined hands with white right-wingers to condemn sex education. In Canada, Somali refugees argued that sex instruction—like school dances and parties—promoted “promiscuity and corruption”; even as she tried to shield her teenaged children from sex, an Iranian immigrant added, their teachers were explaining it in excessive detail. Australian Muslims were outraged to find schools addressing masturbation and oral sex as well as “the etiquette of dating,” which violated the Islamic prohibition on unchaperoned male-female contact; Muslims also blasted schools’ emphasis on “personal autonomy,” which seemed to privilege students’ own desires over communal authority. But the sharpest controversies occurred in Continental Europe, where the Muslim population increase was also the fastest. In Sweden, home to a half million Muslims by 2001, critics said that schools were pushing “free sex”; in Norway, where the Islamic population in the capital city of Oslo rose 34 percent in just two years, Muslims blasted sex educators for providing contraceptives as well as lessons on their use; and in Holland, which had reached a rough *modus vivendi* on sex education in the 1980s, Muslims mounted energetic new challenges to it. “It is ironic that public sex education became acceptable in the Netherlands at the same time as large groups of Muslim immigrants, with ideals of modesty and obligatory innocence, became resident in the country,” one observer wrote. They were now making common cause with Pentecostals in Holland’s so-called Bible Belt, home to the last native-born holdouts against sex education.²⁰

Eastern Europe also witnessed a spike in religious controversy over the subject, finally, spurred less by immigration than by revolution; with the fall of repressive Communist governments, churches were freed to attack school-based sex instruction. To Catholic leaders in Poland, even the bland, conservative sex curriculum instituted

under Communism reflected the “moral decay” of “atheist rule.” Quoting numerous Vatican attacks on the subject, Catholics succeeded in revoking Poland’s compulsory sex education law in 1993; when the subject was reinstituted a few months later, as part of a strict new antiabortion measure, most schools enlisted priests to teach the “Catholic view” of sex. In Russia, meanwhile, leaders in the Orthodox Church stoked nationalist flames against the alleged “western ideological subversion” of sex education. “Children! The enemies of God, enemies of Russia for hundreds of years have tried to conquer our native land with the help of fire and the sword,” the Moscow patriarch declared in a 2000 attack on sex education. “Now they want to annihilate our people with the help of depravity.” Most critics trained their fire at a pilot project sponsored by UNESCO to assist sex education in a handful of schools; others hinted at darker forces, accusing “Western secret services” of clandestine efforts to impose it. Yet as several Orthodox priests observed in 1996, even Western nations that had long taught sex education were now facing citizen attacks upon it. So while Russians struggled to rebut this foreign menace, they needed to work with foreigners who were menaced by it as well.²¹

DIVERSITY AND THE GLOBAL RIGHT, II: UNITING ACROSS BORDERS

Indeed, the work was already well underway. In 1995, two sociology professors at Moscow University invited American sex education opponent Allan Carlson to give an address. Joined by an official from the Russian Orthodox Church, the sociologists and Carlson drew up a plan to bring together conservative activists from around the world. The result was the World Congress of Families (WCF), which held its first conference in Prague in 1997. Meeting again in Geneva two years later, the WCF heard a keynote address by a Kenyan author—dressed in “traditional” African garb—who attacked “worldwide dissemination of a culture of pleasure”; and in 2004, when it met in Mexico City, the group received a letter of praise from the US president George W. Bush. It also heard a speech by Wade Horn, Bush’s

key advisor on family issues and a leading advocate of abstinence-only education. Bush gave the burgeoning Global Right a shot in the arm, declaring that one-third of US foreign assistance for HIV/AIDS prevention must be devoted to abstinence programs; so in Uganda, for example, USAID-funded textbooks were revised to warn readers that condoms could not prevent the transmission of HIV because they have “small pores that could still allow the virus through.” Teachers trained via the USAID project were instructed to avoid all mention of condoms, porous or otherwise, which could only detract from the schools’ abstinence-only message.²²

But the Global Right’s sex education efforts did not stem solely from Bush and US conservative activists, as some liberal critics have alleged. The movement galvanized several years earlier, at the 1994 ICPD conference in Cairo; shortly after that, according to American scholar Michelle Goldberg, “the culture wars went global as never before.” The following year witnessed the birth of the WCF and a bitter controversy at the World Conference on Women in Beijing, where delegates from the Vatican and Muslim countries joined with American conservatives to attack the conference’s resolutions in support of women’s rights and sex education. Two years after that, a United Nations study found that that “ascension of conservative political opinion” was blocking or restricting sex instruction around the world. In 1999, finally, a UN conference marking the five-year anniversary of the Cairo meeting confirmed that the Vatican-Muslim coalition was alive and well. “The Holy See is in an unholy alliance with reactionary forces deep and unholy,” a frustrated British delegate complained, “and I speak as a fully signed-up ethnic Catholic.” Although the UN conference upheld earlier resolutions, including the right of adolescents to receive reproductive information, it also foretold the struggles that lay ahead. “Cairo provided a blueprint. New York, in the end, endorsed it,” one journalist wrote. “But it is clear that the ways and means ... will remain an ideological battleground.”²³

Two months later, when the World Congress of Families convened in Geneva, founder Allan Carlson vowed to continue the fight. Drawing members from many world faiths, not just Muslims and Catholics, the WCF represented “the most orthodox of each group,

people that are least likely to compromise,” Carlson observed. Somewhat paradoxically, it would also connect these hardcore believers across their differences—and against sex education. Funded largely by a donation from Family Voice, a Mormon group based in the United States, the WCF conference was entertained by “Ma and Pa” Osmond of the famous Utah musical family; it also heard a keynote address by Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, president of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Family and a confidant of Pope John Paul II. A similarly diverse set of opponents converged on New York the following year for the five-year anniversary of the Beijing conference, which became yet another opportunity for the Global Right to condemn sex education. “You will work alongside Catholics, Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, and Mormons,” wrote one activist, rallying protesters to the meeting. “We are the children of Abraham arising to fight for faith and family.” Although the conference once again confirmed earlier resolutions, no one could miss the resistance. Protesters included well-coiffed Mormon and Catholic women, wearing “Motherhood” buttons on their power suits, as well as a team of long-bearded friars who arranged themselves in the shape of a cross and prayed for the souls of the assembled delegates.²⁴

When George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001, then, the Global Right coalition against sex education was already in full flower. Bush’s real contribution was to place the American state—and, sometimes, its resources—behind the campaign. Backing off its previous commitments to the Cairo and Beijing accords, the United States stunned the UN’s special session on children in 2002 by opposing any reference to “reproductive health services and education” for youth; other opponents of the resolution were Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Syria, and the Vatican, leading one wag to suggest that America had actually joined forces with the “Axis of Evil” that Bush accused of fomenting terrorism. In a series of statements, US officials confirmed that American aid to sex education overseas would be limited to abstinence-only instruction. It is unclear how much material support the United States provided to such programs during the Bush years. But the embrace of abstinence-only approaches among conservatives in the West certainly struck a chord in the developing world, where like-minded activists cited the alleged evils

of so-called comprehensive sex education in Europe and the United States. "Sex education has failed in America," an Indian observed in 2005, "and the way it is imparted there ... could be blamed for heightened sexual activity, abortions and a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases." Another critic was even more blunt. "One should learn from others," he wrote. "The example of western countries in this regard can be an 'eye-opener' for us.... Let us not repeat the same blunder in India, too."²⁵

THE QUESTION OF CHILDHOOD IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Most of all, critics around the world condemned sex education for infringing upon the sexual innocence of children. Since the days of Sigmund Freud, of course, educators had deliberated whether, when, and how young people were sexual beings. But the debate accelerated in the era of AIDS, spurred by the astonishing development of new media technologies: videos, satellite television, and the Internet. Each new advance made sexual imagery more readily available to more and more children and adolescents, which in turn underscored the issue of what—and how much—they should know about the subject. By 1999, even a relatively conservative country like Malaysia reported that nearly half of its teenagers had seen a pornographic video. As one educator predicted, adolescent consumption of pornography would become even more common when the "Multimedia Super Corridor"—soon to be renamed the Information Superhighway, and then the Internet—came to Malaysia. She was right. By 2007, an educator in Ghana warned that the widespread growth of computer technology—one of the keys to the country's economic boom—had also increased students' access to pornography, which in turn "leads to a debased conscience and a perverted character"; in the worst cases, the educator added, children became "addicted" to watching it. Almost all of this sexual content—whether on video, television, or the Internet—came from the West, as a Thai parent emphasized. "I blame the media that allows Western culture to reach Thailand," he charged, noting the rise of premarital sexual activity, pregnancy, and AIDS in the country.²⁶

To advocates in the world public health community, of course, these developments simply underscored the need for so-called comprehensive sex education. “Suppose if a couple rides a scooter, both need to wear helmets, as both are vulnerable,” an Indian newspaper editorialized, pleading for schools to address contraception, abortion, and other sensitive topics. “Sex education is not at all a liberal thought with strains of western permissiveness; rather, it is borne out of necessity, of the changing times we live in.” As the comment’s defensive tone suggested, however, more and more critics regarded sex education as a reflection of the “permissive” trends it claimed to control. “Far from being an antidote to today’s sexual revolution ... sex education programs are a typical and integral part of it,” a conservative Catholic activist in the United States wrote in 1996. “Their real aim is to train the kids to ‘get with’ today’s sexual revolution—*times have changed!*—not to warn them against it.” Her rhetoric hearkened back to the 1960s, when Western liberals like Mary Calderone cast sex education as a response to new mores, and conservatives blasted it as an embodiment of the same. Now a similar debate played out around the world, with an added tinge of imperialism; instead of simply corrupting children with sexual ideas and impulses, critics charged, sex education also undermined their “native” or “indigenous” traditions. To one Kenyan, sex education violated “authentic African values”; in India, critics derided it as “a conspiracy by Western bodies” against “Indian culture.”²⁷

In the worst case, its foes said, sex education led to the actual violation of children’s bodies. Ironically, sex educators often promoted the subject as a way to stem the widespread problem of sexual abuse by teachers. The issue was especially acute in Africa, where male teachers coerced female students into trading sex for school fees; such abuse was also a common form of AIDS transmission on the continent, where some countries reported that as many as 30 percent of their teachers were HIV-positive. But to critics, sex education was once again part of the problem, not the solution; by requiring teachers and students to discuss sex, it exacerbated the harm it was designed to prevent. “What has actually happened,” one African critic charged, “is that sex education ... has opened doors for many teachers to take advantage of the age and vulnerability of girls to

abuse them sexually.” On the one hand, an Indian women’s leader worried, sex education would make children “more curious about sex”; on the other, it would make teachers more cognizant of the students’ sexuality. “Students are constantly complaining about sexual exploitation or harassment by teachers,” another Indian warned. “If these sex gurus are appointed, then more girls will be exploited.” Some teachers who engaged in sexual abuse even went on to blame sex education, confirming critics’ worst fears. “After reading about human reproductive organs and sex education, I was enticed to try it out myself,” a male Indonesian teacher told police, after confessing to molesting eight boys in his elementary school.²⁸

But it was highly unlikely that the teacher’s own sexual instruction made any reference to pedophilia or to homosexuality, other than to condemn both of them—and often in the same breath. To be sure, critics in the Third World often charged sex education with spreading homosexuality alongside other alleged “Western” social ills, including child molestation. In the West itself, however, most schools remained silent about same-sex love. In New York, home to one of the world’s largest gay communities, school superintendent Joseph Fernandez was forced out of office in 1993 in a flap over a new multicultural curriculum that included several books about gay families; British parents burned a similar book at a 1986 protest, which set the stage for a Parliamentary law two years later barring “promotion of homosexuality” in schools. The very phrase implied that gay orientation was not “natural” to young people; it stemmed instead from some early trauma or seduction, often at the hands of a teacher or other caregiver. Meanwhile, educators in the developing world continued to insist that homosexuality—like sex education—was an evil import from the corrupt West. As one Kenyan critic noted, quoting national independence leader Jomo Kenyatta, “there’s no African word for homosexuality”; according to Daniel arap Moi, the country’s ruler in the 1990s, the concept was “against African norms and traditions.” So it must originate elsewhere, a Botswanan student added. “These things are from alien countries,” he flatly declared.²⁹

But in a world of enormous diversity inside borders as well as movement across them, it was becoming difficult to determine what was alien—or “native”—to any given country or community. In a

televised debate in Lebanon, for example, a psychoanalyst called childhood sexuality a “scientifically proven fact”; but a medical doctor countered that it did not exist, except in “the perverted Freudian mind” of the West. Likewise, some Chinese educators spoke knowingly of child sexual impulses while others dismissed them as a “foreign” idea, again citing the alleged pathologies of Freud. Some Indian observers called sex education “a crime against the younger generation” and a “form of western aggression,” while others warned that Indian youth would suffer—from unwanted pregnancy, early marriage, and especially AIDS—unless they received explicit instruction about it. In the increasingly multicultural West, meanwhile, sex educators discovered that many newcomers simply did not share their assumptions about sexuality, childhood, and much else. “Why should parents allow their children to be taught those values which are destructive of their own family and religious beliefs?” a Muslim immigrant in the United Kingdom asked, decrying discussions of out-of-wedlock sex in schools. But it was even worse in Holland, he added, where a relative reported that his school had required him to make sculptures of “body parts” as part of sex education. The curriculum also included frank descriptions of homosexuality, which was *haram* (forbidden) in Islam.³⁰

In the Netherlands, however, gay teachers in Muslim neighborhoods had been “forced back into the closet”—as one scholar wrote—after students harassed them. “The greatest challenge in the Netherlands is to make social life more sexually diverse and to ensure access for young people of all ethnic backgrounds and religious persuasions to the erotic worlds they may be interested in,” the scholar added. “The challenge is to add multisexuality to multiculturality.” But he gave no indication about how Holland could meet this test, especially if the people providing sex education could not express their own sexual thoughts and identities; he simply called upon schoolteachers to celebrate “difference,” even as his own evidence illustrated that many of their students balked at the idea. “Not educational policies, but sexual pleasures ought to be a Dutch concert where every bird learns to sing its own song,” he intoned. As always, it would be classroom instructors—not scholars, activists, politicians, or school officials—who had to conduct this cacophonous orchestra.

In a rapidly globalizing world, teachers were charged with harmonizing the dissonant tones and rhythms that human beings assigned to sex.³¹

IN THE CLASSROOM, I: TEACHERS

Most of all, teachers were supposed to talk with—not just talk at—their students. Especially after the AIDS crisis began, “discussion” became the key pedagogical mantra for sex educators around the world. To be sure, earlier generations of school officials had also called for “free, frank enquiry and discussion,” as a British teachers’ union resolved in 1944; at the 1973 Ford Foundation conference for African educators in Mali, likewise, organizers sponsored small-group conversations to dispel teachers’ “subconscious fears” about sex. But the 1980s and 1990s brought a renewed accent on *student* discussion. It was not enough to give students information about HIV and other diseases, educators said; schools had to alter their attitudes, which could only come from free-ranging dialogues about the context and meaning of sex in their lives. One Swedish foreign-aid worker even suggested that HIV/AIDS was “a blessing in a terrible disguise,” insofar as it would “force people to start speaking openly about sex and sexuality”; anything less would be a “recipe for disaster,” a Dutch educator added, citing high adolescent AIDS and pregnancy rates in the United States. In fact, growing numbers of American teachers were already using “participatory activities” in sex education, as an impressed Turkish visitor reported in 2000. Upon his return home, he instituted similar methods in the school where he worked. “We have joined the universal educational mission of talking openly about sexuality in our schools,” he declared.³²

Yet in most classrooms, in Turkey and around the world, the mission went unmet. The teacher acknowledged that his school was “not typically Turkish”; as a private institution affiliated with a national university, its teachers were better prepared—and its patrons more open-minded—than the norm. For the most part, teachers lacked both the pedagogical skills and the parental support to engage in the type of freewheeling, interactive instruction that inter-

national aid organizations envisioned. Even in Sweden, 92 percent of classroom instructors in a 2006 survey reported that they had “little or no preparation” for teaching the subject. Only four of the sex education measures passed by American states in the wake of the AIDS crisis included a teacher-training requirement, yielding “situations where unprepared teachers are, in effect, *sitting ducks* for ... antisexuality education factions which continue to plague this field,” as one worried health educator underlined. Both problems were even more acute in the developing world, of course, where many teachers had little formal training of any kind. Teaching a new and unfamiliar subject to classes as large as eighty or one hundred, instructors often had no choice but to engage in the didactic, teacher-centered pedagogy that aid groups and educational experts denounced. “My teacher stands in front of the class and writes on the board what HIV stands for,” a South African student reported, “then we repeat.” Around the world, an Irish sex educator noted, many teachers knew little else. “They’re trained to walk in, stand in front of the class and act like dictators,” she lamented. “It’s talk and chalk, still.”³³

To be sure, some brave teachers did attempt to provide sex education via games, role-plays, and other interactive methods. But even these isolated efforts often revealed the teachers’ lack of preparation for the task. In Uganda, for example, one instructor led a debate about whether men or women spread the HIV virus more often in their society. The correct answer was men, but the male students in the class won the debate “because the women were few and ladies are not assertive,” the teacher recalled. A South African teacher leading a discussion about sex asked students to imagine that a girl in the class was sexually active, rendering her the butt of vicious jokes; another student who participated in a role-play about AIDS was nicknamed “Virus,” which caused the confused boy to ask a researcher if he was indeed infected with HIV. Other teachers were hampered by shortages of up-to-date textbooks, which in turn highlighted their own ignorance—especially about sexually transmitted diseases. “People like me do not clearly understand HIV/AIDS and the ways of protection,” a Vietnamese teacher admitted. “We know using the condom but how to use it we really do not know.” In Tanzania, likewise, a teacher trainee frankly admitted that he lacked enough

knowledge to teach about AIDS. “Some people say that the origin of HIV is from gays, so it is difficult to convince students on this,” he noted, “I do not have answers for my students on this and I will teach as I am taught.”³⁴

For many teachers, of course, that meant teaching nothing at all; having learned little in school about sex, they avoided the topic whenever they could. In Hong Kong, over half of the schools reported in 1994 that their teachers were unwilling to instruct sex education; in Russia, three-quarters of teachers said that parents—not schools—should provide it. Most of all, teachers around the world feared that parents would revile them for teaching the subject. In the United States, one-third of teachers said their schools were “nervous about possible adverse community reaction” to sex education; meanwhile, roughly one-fifth reported that they had refrained from discussing sensitive topics—including AIDS, abortion, and gays—for fear of provoking such opposition. “Sex education seems to incorporate everything from scientific information about reproduction to child abuse prevention, from abstinence to contraceptive use, from postponing involvement to rational and informed decision making,” one educator explained. “Teachers are on the front line, asked to resolve the conflicts. Is it any wonder that teachers feel uncomfortable?” Self-censorship was also common among British teachers, particularly after Parliament issued a ban on “promoting” homosexuality. “It takes not so much courage as madness for a teacher to teach sex education these days,” one British instructor surmised. “After every lesson I just cross my fingers—there’s bound to be at least one parent who would complain if they knew what was being discussed in class.”³⁵

But the biggest risks were in the developing world, where teachers were truly caught between a rock and a hard place. If they avoided sexual topics, especially AIDS, they were disobeying national policy and failing to protect young people from a cruel disease, but if they complied, they were corrupting minors with lurid ideas and images. “Anyone who talks about sex is regarded as a bad person,” noted a teacher in Lesotho, where a tribal chief disciplined another instructor for addressing the topic. “It is even worse when you talk about sex with children.” The problem was especially delicate for female

teachers, and even more so if they worked in coeducational settings. “I cannot teach the boys all these things. I feel ashamed,” a Bangladeshi teacher worried. “And what will the community say if they find out?” In Kenya, women who taught the subject were called prostitutes; in Nigeria, vulgar; and in Thailand, promiscuous. Yet Thais also complained that women assigned to instruct the subject were nuns or “old maids,” who lacked the sexual experience to teach sex education! No matter their gender, people who taught about sex in schools could not avoid questions about their own sexuality. In Dominica as well as Thailand, parents complained that “effeminate” teachers—that is, suspected gay males—were providing sex education. And in classrooms around the world, students wondered what their teachers did outside of class, and with whom. During lessons on HIV/AIDS, African children asked teachers if they had been tested for it; they also inquired about which contraceptive methods the teachers used. Asked if she had tried the female condom, a Botswana teacher replied that students “should not become personal when we talk about these things.”³⁶

IN THE CLASSROOM, II: STUDENTS

But sex *was* personal, in every respect, and the students knew it. Around the world, they complained that teachers and schools avoided or downplayed the subject because of its intimate implications. Even as teachers worried about instructing such a delicate subject, students said they were too worried—and too delicate—in their presentation of it. “If I want to know about sex, I look at magazines or ask my friends,” a fifteen-year-old girl in Hong Kong said. “My teachers are too embarrassed to tell me.” To be sure, many teachers dutifully explained the merging of sperm and egg and other mechanics of reproduction. “All they told us in school was what goes where,” complained a teenager in England, who was also fifteen. “But we wanted to know was how to do it and how to make it nice.” Most of all, she explained, adolescents wanted to understand the social dimensions and consequences of sex. Why, for example, was a boy who had sex regarded as a “hero,” whereas a girl who did the same

thing received a “bad reputation”? But when students raised real-life issues of this sort, they were often met with a steely silence—or, worse, with a harsh reprimand. “Some teachers are conservative and view sexual communication as a disgusting thing,” a Thai high school student noted. “This makes us feel uncomfortable when we want to ask questions. Or, sometimes we ask but get very out-of-date answers.”³⁷

Indeed, students recognized, a good deal of teachers’ reticence on sexual matters stemmed from the teachers’ ignorance about them. Some instructors in Namibia actually hid when it was time for sex education class, lest the youth discover how little their teachers actually knew. Others tried to disguise their lack of preparation by lashing out. When a Tanzanian boy asked whether you could contract AIDS from a rusted nail, his teacher brusquely replied that he would not answer “stupid questions”; in Nigeria, meanwhile, a student who insisted that the proper name for female external genitalia was “vulva”—not “private parts,” as her teacher said—was denounced by the same teacher as a “nasty girl.” Students often responded to such ridicule in kind, eroding classroom discipline and making teachers even more reluctant to address sex at all. Understandably, students reserved their greatest derision for teachers who had sex with students—often, in exchange for school fees or other material goods—even as they preached the evils of sex outside of marriage. But any teacher who engaged sexual topics risked losing students’ respect, especially in the developing world. “They think they know more than we do,” a South African teacher said. “They’ll laugh at us and will think we are going insane.” Sex education teachers in India faced “teasing” and “absurd questions”; in neighboring Nepal, students mocked a teacher assigned to the subject as “Reproductive Sir.” A Chinese cartoon showed a teacher displaying a picture of a condom and declaring, “Today, we are going to talk about sex.” But the boy seated in front of him was laughing, symbolizing sex education’s ongoing threat to teachers’ authority and control.³⁸

Nor did the subject typically affect students’ academic outcomes or their teachers’ professional trajectories, which were mostly determined by the students’ performance in “major” classes: science, math, history, and so on. Educators called these disciplines “testing

subjects” because they appeared on national standardized examinations, the sine qua non of assessment and advancement in most parts of the globe; by corollary, anything that wasn’t tested didn’t matter. “What most parents perceive as a good teacher is one who pushes as many students as possible into better and higher high schools,” noted an educator in Japan, which put an especially high accent on test performance. “Of course, human sexuality education falls outside the rubric of ‘examination hell’ study subjects, and it tends to be ignored by both parents and teachers.” Realizing that their instructors rarely took sex education seriously, many students followed suit. “Anything that doesn’t have an exam at the end of it is going to be a doss as far as students are concerned,” an Irish teacher explained, using the local slang (doss) for an easy course. “It’s the class where they can go in and chat.” As per the mantra of “discussion,” of course, many educators *wanted* students to “chat” in the class. So some of them opposed extending standardized tests to sex education, even as they acknowledged students’ minimal investment in a nontested subject. If there was a national examination of it, another Irish educator argued, teachers would ignore “personal development” in favor of test preparation. Sex education remained “the only subject that is only about the students,” he added, and not about their scores.³⁹

But the students were often reluctant to discuss sexual issues in school, just as their teachers were. In the West, some students demanded a more “comprehensive” approach than the clinical, sperm-and-egg lessons in their textbooks. In the United Kingdom, most notably, over two thousand adolescent girls signed a 2006 petition for realistic, dialogue-based sex education. When they got to class, however, students often balked at the same. “I didn’t want a teacher thinking, ‘Oh, my gosh, she’s having sex,’” a Canadian adolescent said, explaining her own reticence during sex education. In the developing world, meanwhile, many students—but especially female ones—were mortified by the entire topic. Girls in Ghana complained that boys teased them during sex education discussions, which diverted the girls from their studies; they preferred to learn the subject at home, where they could “concentrate much more.” In Nepal, meanwhile, students of both sexes were embarrassed to mention the subject in the presence of teachers. “They are like our parents, not

friends with whom we feel comfortable,” one student said. “How can I discuss these things!” The student had stitched together the sex-related pages in the class textbook, so that nobody could see them; teachers reported doing the same in Egypt, to fend off attacks from parents as well as embarrassing questions from students. Most commonly, teachers lacked access to any books or other instructional materials about sex. So they put a few notes on the blackboard and left the room, leaving students to “learn” the subject on their own.⁴⁰

Predictably, most of them learned little to nothing. In Nepal, for example, only 43 percent of high school students could name a contraceptive used by men and just 37 percent could identify one used by women; and while almost all of them had heard of AIDS, just half knew how it was spread. Most alarmingly, 80 percent of Nepali girls were not aware that a person who looked healthy could be infected with HIV and could transmit it to others; in nearby India, meanwhile, 80 percent of young women seeking an abortion did not know that sexual intercourse causes pregnancy. Similarly dismal statistics could be found among adolescents across the developing world, where myths and misunderstandings frequently substituted for sexual knowledge. Sixty percent of fourteen-year-old girls in China believed they could contract AIDS from kissing or from a toilet seat; the same fraction of teenagers in Zimbabwe said that birth control would lead to infertility; and a similar percentage of male Korean university students said that urination after sex could rid them of a sexually transmitted disease. Adolescents in India and Africa said that showering after intercourse would protect them from AIDS; in Taiwan, that they would be infected by sitting next to an HIV-positive person; and in Ghana, that mosquito bites could transmit the virus. To be sure, adolescents in the West continued to maintain their own fair share of myths and falsehoods. Poles believed that masturbation caused physical and mental illness, that vinegar could act as a contraceptive, and that the withdrawal method was 100 percent effective; in Latvia, meanwhile, over one-third of teens said that HIV could be spread via coughs and other airborne routes. And around the world, of course, youth held on to the most timeless sexual folk wisdom of all: you couldn’t get pregnant the first time you had intercourse, or during your menstrual period.⁴¹

To sex educators around the world, of course, these attitudes simply demonstrated the need for *more* sex education. But it was unclear just how much schools could affect student beliefs—and, even more, student behavior—on matters related to sex. Nor was it clear that “discussion” of the subject would yield the salutary consequences—in belief or behavior—that educators imagined. In 1993, the Chilean government received a grant from the Ford Foundation in support of “Conversations,” an innovative program to bring students, teachers, parents, and community leaders into dialogue on questions of sex. Instead of creating more space and independence for youth sexuality, however, the discussion galvanized conservatives who wanted to *limit* such autonomy. As a Ford report admitted, “school authorities could not control the process”; once “discussion” began, there was no telling where it would end. To the advocates of “Conversations,” young people had a basic human right to make their own sexual choices. But the program’s critics said that parents and religious leaders should rightly control these decisions; indeed, it was wrong to assume otherwise. Eventually, under pressure from the Catholic Church, the government was forced to modify the program’s emphasis on student decision making with a more didactic approach. “There are values at stake,” a leading right-wing politician explained. He was right about that, and about the value-laden dimension of sexual “rights” overall. A century after modern sex education started, its dilemmas remained largely the same: whose values were right for children and adolescents, who would decide, and why.⁴²