

OPINION

*Sex ed must account for pleasure, not just risk*

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by **Shilpa Phadke**

In the last few years in India, multiple instances of young children being sexually assaulted or molested in schools or school buses have come to light. This, not surprisingly, has created a panic among parents, which was only exacerbated after a [recent incident](#) in Bangalore in which a 6-year-old child was raped in a school and its administrators tried to hush up the assault.

In response, there have been a fair number of workshops and newspaper articles on [teaching children about good touch and bad touch](#). The idea is to teach young children to recognize when people do not need to touch them in particular ways as well as to understand personal boundaries. Some schools are conducting such workshops too. One would assume that the logical progression of this would be sexuality education in later years. But India's new health minister, Harsh Vardhan, in the central government suggests that sexuality education should be banned in schools.

Under the curriculum development section of his [website](#), a statement on education reads, "Value Education will be integrated with course content as per Order of Hon'ble Supreme Court, 2002. So-called 'sex education' to be banned." The [mainstream media](#) responded in shrill tones and the alternative (mostly online) media produced [parody](#) after [parody](#).

As a feminist mother, I have mixed feelings about school efforts to teach children to be safe. I want my daughter to be safe, and I am very cautious when it comes to trusting anyone with my daughter.

At the same time, I am a little concerned that fear and anxiety will become the only prisms through which children learn about their sexuality. But I am also concerned that Vardhan's comments may portend a step toward the state taking a stand against sexuality education. This would neatly tie in with the conservative morality of right wing politicians and the village councils called [khap panchayats](#). Amid a rising number of reported sexual crimes against women, children and [sexual minorities](#) (groups whose sexual practices are different from those deemed "normal") it is imperative not only to increase vigilance but also to assess the state of [sex education in India today](#). This conversation must be tied to an understanding of not just violence and coercion but also consent,

pleasure and desire built around an understanding of and respect for adolescent agency.

Checkered history

The Indian state has had a checkered history with sex education. In 2005 the Indian central government rolled out an adolescent education program (AEP) in collaboration with the National AIDS Control Organization. The agenda laid the foundation for a “responsible lifestyle, including healthy relationships and safe sex habits,” and was aimed at high schoolers ages 14 to 17. Despite its limited aims and bland wording, the AEP generated considerable public [anxiety](#). Several states — including Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan — objected to it and refused to run it [because of](#) its ostensibly explicit or objectionable content. Some states argued that this was a Western import and thus against Indian culture — [without acknowledging that prior to this, the National Council of Educational Research and Training initiated an AEP](#) in 1993 that was replaced by the new program.

While this program was adequate in addressing questions of safe sex, there’s more to sex than health and contraception.

Consent is central to a conversation on sexuality to underscore women’s right not only to say no but also to say yes. While researching [young women’s engagement with the emergency contraceptive pill](#), or Plan B, I found that many young women resorted to using it because they did not want to appear overly knowledgeable or enthusiastic about having sex by carrying condoms or taking a daily contraceptive pill, which they thought would label them sluts. Nor did they want their parents to discover that they were taking the pill, since parents were unlikely to respond favorably to the knowledge that their daughters not only were sexually active but also were exercising agency. When young women are not permitted to act on their desires without fear of reprisal or humiliation, they can find themselves in situations of greater danger to their health and safety. Several young women resorted to taking emergency contraception on a regular basis, which is far less effective than the pill or other forms of regular contraception.

“ There’s more to sex than health and contraception. ”

In a separate research project on [feminist mothering](#), I spoke with a group of women who struggled with the question of sexual choices for their daughters even as they tried to help them learn how to negotiate various risks in a world increasingly seen as dangerous for young women. Feminist mothers expressed concern that the first lexicon they used to speak with their children about sex used the language of danger: They gave advice about not trusting people and about the possibility of harm. They worried that information often provided in the language of good and bad touch would set the tone for their children’s understanding of sexuality as potentially dangerous at an age (often as young as 3) when they had no conceptual understanding of sexuality.

We are hampered by the lack of a language of pleasure or of a politics of consent, not just in India but around the world, as various [reports on slut shaming](#) suggest. [Slut shaming](#), in a nutshell, consists of blaming women for having sexual desires and acting on them. The other side of slut shaming is victim blaming; when women are attacked against their will or coerced in any way, the question often asked is, Did she ask for it?

All the women I interviewed agreed that children need sex education. Although they differed on the details of sex education, they all felt a child’s right to know and to make informed choices was nonnegotiable. This approach is feminist in that it conveys to children that both respect and pleasure are integral to sex and sexuality. Many feminist mothers agreed that they wanted their children to have fun, confident in the knowledge that their mothers would support them, even when they do not agree with them. This is a basic challenge of feminist mothering: to give daughters the space to make choices that their mothers might disagree with.

Negotiating anxiety

As the news reports more horrifying incidences of sexual violence, I try not to let my anxieties control my 4-year-old daughter’s life. She doesn’t take the school bus. I drop her off at and pick her up from school. I justify this by telling myself that it gives us time to talk at the beginning and end of her school day, but it also means that there is one less public space I have to worry about.

At another level, I struggle with my daughter’s multiplying questions — many of which stem from information I have given her. “Why do boys have penises and girls vaginas? When will my breasts grow? How did I get into your stomach?” I worry that I will give her too much information, information that her 4-year-old consciousness cannot process. I worry that I will give her too little information and she will

stop asking me. As a parent I am stunned by the paucity of Indian resources that one might label broadly progressive, other than the New Delhi-based non-profit organization TARSHI's fabulous [Yellow Book](#), which is straight-talking, feminist and queer friendly.

In a world where women, particularly young women, are expected to be sexy and desirable without being sexually assaulted or appearing promiscuous, being a feminist mother is no easy task. How do I teach my daughter to recognize danger, negotiate risk and yet have fun? The best I can do is to give her information, keep the lines of communication open and teach her the power of her own body.

I also struggle to introduce into our conversations a respect for and awareness of difference. I hope that I am setting the stage for future conversations on cis-gender and transgender identities. We encounter hijras (eunuchs) at one traffic signal on the school route; we have begun to call them girl-boys. I hope that I am laying the foundation for her to eventually grasp the gender continuum. I hope that it teaches her not just about her own rights and to stand up for herself but also about the rights of others.

As our conversation on sexuality evolves, I hope that it will expand to include the rights of marginalized groups and to emphasize that consent reflects not just our right to say no, but also our right to say yes. One day, I imagine, young women will be free to explore their sexuality as something pleasurable without fear of violence or shame.

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This is a highly charged and dangerous subject to be so lightly tossed about.

"Sex." The very word is controversial. Fundamentalists want it kept hushed while liberals seek to de-stigmatize it. And both claim they are the true arbiters of its meaning. The author claims she is a "Feminist Mother" while never describing what it is. I am a Feminist Father...I guess. I am a Feminist and a Father so...

Liberal sexual morays are everywhere and in every culture and telling one culture that it is wrong is dangerous. It causes untold animosity and suffering

for everyone involved. As an example...forcing women in or out of the hijab. Let the women themselves decide. But some things are universal.

Female genital mutilation is an abomination. Rape. Child brides.

And the need to destigmatize any and all sexual activity is bordering on dangerous. The "If it feels good do it" culture is frightening. Telling 14 year olds who are NOT adults and are not even capable of legally signing contracts in ANY nation the ins and outs of sexual acts is too far.

Sex is a gift...not a toy to pull out when you are bored. Today it can kill you.

Rather than telling children that sex is dirty...or a toy...why don't we let them know that it is something to protect?

REPLY

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