

KEEPING FIT: THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SEX EDUCATION

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<http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/early-sex-education.html>

Looking back at his childhood on the Lower East Side, Michael Gold remembered that there were “hundreds of prostitutes of my street.” Like many of the young children on the Lower East Side in early twentieth-century New York, Gold “knew what it was they sold.” He also knew the even harsher realities behind their trade: “Earth’s trees, grass, flowers, could not grow on my street;” he later said, “but the rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day.”

In early twentieth-century America, where there was no cure for syphilis, many reformers viewed the women Gold saw every day with horror and fear. These women, who could be found everywhere in America, were believed to pose a very real threat to the American family and, more broadly, to the health and future of the nation.



Lower East Side, New York City, Early 20th Century America, Public Domain

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, reformers began to call upon both their government and their fellow Americans to take action to end what they saw as rampant sexual immorality and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Some of these reformers called for a crackdown on prostitution, an end to the distribution of “obscene” materials, and even limits on the growing independence of young women. Other reformers, however, took a different approach believing that educating young people about “healthy” sexuality---sexuality within marriage---would change sexual behavior for the better, creating in the process healthy families and communities.



Immigrants Arriving at Ellis Island, early 20th century, Public Domain

The federal government’s sex education programs originated from and reflected this impetus to protect the family through publicly funded initiatives. Although the government’s first sex education campaign was directed at boys and although the creators of the materials used in this campaign were men, early sex education programs

overwhelmingly emphasized the role sex education could play in protecting women and the family. Young men, boys, and soldiers were all taught that their self-control was crucial in protecting their future wives and children. Programs promoting sex education were, in that sense, little different from the many laws and programs protecting women workers and the family that emerged during the Progressive era.

As reformers began to advocate for better sex education, public health experts and others sounded the alarm about declining sexual morals. There was nothing new in this warning: fears that sexual morals are declining can be found in almost any society. But in the early twentieth century, several factors seemed to indicate that this was an issue of special urgency.

A massive influx of immigrants, some 24 million between 1880 and 1920, led many native-born Americans to believe that their culture was under attack. For the most part, native-born Americans' unease with different cultures led them to see immigrants as more sexually promiscuous and dangerous than native-born whites but the truth was many immigrant girls did indulge in what native-born populations saw as promiscuous behavior.

However, prostitution in these communities was the result of the poverty which was common in most immigrant communities; it was not, as many native-born Americans insisted, the result of the inherently immoral nature of immigrant cultures. Indignation about the supposedly high numbers of immigrant women who turned to prostitution were wildly overblown as were rumors of "white slavers," immigrant men who lured native-born women into a life of prostitution. But Progressive reformers were

as susceptible to these views of immigrants as their fellow Americans and they saw an urgent need to "Americanize" immigrants by providing them with sex education which stressed the dangers of promiscuity and promoted their view of correct sexual behavior.

Fears regarding the sexual abduction of white women were widespread, early 20th century, Public Domain



While many native-born Americans saw southern and Eastern European immigrants as so foreign as to be non-white, the emergence of Jim Crow during the

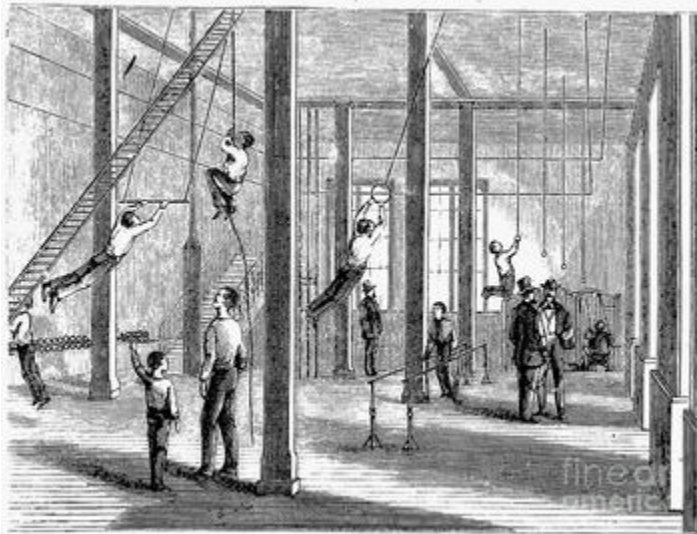
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also played into and reflected native-born white Americans' fears about the sexual behavior of non-whites. White perceptions of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were, and always had been, extraordinarily contradictory. On the one hand, these minority groups were routinely depicted as ugly and diseased. But on the other hand, whites also saw minority women as sexually alluring and highly promiscuous.

Legislation and employment practices which reflected these fears simply exacerbated these negative stereotypes. Anti-immigration laws, intended to exclude Asian immigrants, meant that the few Asian women who arrived in the United States often came as prostitutes who were basically sold to brothel owners. Discrimination in the workplace combined with limited job opportunities meant that many African-American women who worked as domestics were more vulnerable to sexual coercion at the hands of their male employers than their white counterparts who now worked in factories, offices, and stores.

Anti-miscegenation laws, which prevented inter-racial couples from marrying, further added to these negative perceptions. Out of frustration, many of these couples simply lived together out of wedlock, a practice that fed into the widespread belief that non-whites corrupted whites. Compounding all of these problems was the widespread poverty which existed in most of these communities. Because poverty often goes hand in hand with prostitution, divorce, and desertion, many poor Americans, who were often immigrants or people of color, engaged in sexual behavior which "native-born" white Americans saw as immoral.

By the early twentieth century, both the growing power of women's movements along with the rise of a mass media pushed these fears regarding Americans' sexual behavior into the forefront of the national discussion. Newspapers, popular literature, and even plays and films now commonly depicted men and women, immigrant and native-born, white and non-white, as having little concern for sexual morality. Stoked by fears that sexual promiscuity was rampant, private organizations which provided education designed to end sexual promiscuity sprang up across the country.

One of the earliest private organizations to promote sex education in the United States was the Young Men's Christian Association or the YMCA as it is more commonly known. While the Y is often



viewed today as a secular organization, it began as an evangelical Protestant organization. In 1885, the YMCA organized a corps of the "White Cross Army." These were young men who were given a rudimentary form of sex education and who then took oaths of purity. Although this first form of sex education fizzled after encountering opposition from opponents within and without the Y, it laid the groundwork for the emergence of a variety of other sex education initiatives between 1890 and 1920.

The YMCA promoted physical and spiritual health,
Public Domain

In 1914, several small independent organizations combined to create a new organization dedicated to battling venereal disease. Reflecting the nation's ambivalence toward venereal disease and the reluctance of even Progressive reformers to speak candidly about sex and/or venereal disease, this organization called itself the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA).

Even as ASHA's founders pushed for openness in discussions about venereal disease, they and other Americans continued to use the euphemism "social hygiene" to refer to sexual health. Prince Morrow, a physician, became one of the first and most dynamic leaders of ASHA. Under Morrow, ASHA became the largest organization dedicated primarily to providing all Americans with good sex education. ASHA saw several issues as paramount in the battle for sex education. First and foremost, the conspiracy of silence on venereal diseases needed to be broken. Sex education should be made available in schools and through broad-reaching educational campaigns designed to change behavior. Research into the causes of sexually transmitted diseases needed to be prioritized and the high medical costs associated with disease control needed to be contained.

Finally, the nation's social, political, and religious leaders would have to speak openly about venereal disease and its impact on the nation as a whole. To accomplish these tasks, ASHA launched a massive pamphlet war. ASHA's sex education pamphlets provided some of the most detailed and most explicit sex education available in early twentieth-century America; some of these pamphlets were produced in-house by ASHA itself but many others were produced by the federal government and then re-printed by ASHA which distributed them under its name.

As a private organization, ASHA lacked the funds and power to enact the agenda which they advocated and their call for a comprehensive approach to the battle against venereal disease was really directed at the federal government. By the early twentieth century, substantial precedents existed which allow the federal government to draw upon its diverse powers to force the issue of sexually transmitted diseases into the open, to push sex education into the schools and the workplace, and to conduct research into the causes of and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

Despite its prominence, ASHA's role in advocating this agenda was, in other words, little different from that of other smaller special interest groups. However, beginning in the 1910s, the federal government aggressively took up ASHA's call and led the way in the fight against sexually transmitted diseases.

Even as federal officials weighed the possibility of initiating a national war against venereal disease, a new and more violent war erupted in Europe. Concerned that America would need to send its sons to fight in this war, many federal officials now began to speak openly about the need to ensure that the nation's young men were "fit to fight." Public health officials, Progressive reformers, and, now, the military united to launch what they believed would be a comprehensive sex education campaign directed at the nation's young men.