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A Preliminary Report on The Impact of Evangelical Christian Purity Culture on Sexual Minorities

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Purity culture is a term used to describe the evangelical Christian abstinence-based approach to teaching children and adolescents about sex. Key components of purity culture includes modest dress for females, emphasis on virginity as a fragile gift, strict performance of the gender binary, heteronormativity, and the idea that sexual exploration causes one to be “damaged goods.” Research on the long-term effects of being a member of purity culture during adolescence is extremely limited—especially for those who identify as sexual and gender minorities as adults. This qualitative study explores how purity culture impacted the sexuality, gender expression, religiosity, and outness of adults who identify as sexual or gender minorities.

For this study, we analyzed fourteen in-depth interviews with persons who had been part of purity culture and are sexual or gender minorities. Using CQR (Consensual Qualitative Research) methodology, preliminary analyses has yielded several themes related to the long-term effects of having been a part of purity culture, including persistent fear of sexual activity and of religious or social censure, social isolation, shame regarding sexual desire, and a lack of knowledge related to reproductive anatomy, reproductive health, and healthy sexual behaviors. Participants also experienced a variety of barriers to accessing sex education; to recognizing and understanding their developing sexual orientation or gender identity; and to accepting and disclosing their non-heterosexual orientation or gender dysphoria. Consequently, many participants reported high levels of sexual shame and revulsion toward who they were. Finally, many experienced deconversion from their faith of origin and the loss of significant relationships (e.g., parents, siblings, spouses, and other congregants).