

Beyond condoms and pregnancy prevention: Examining young women's sexual safety labor

Harley Dutcher, M.A.

Sara I. McClelland, Ph.D.

Departments of Women's Studies and Psychology, University of Michigan

Email: dutcherh@umich.edu

Abstract

Definitions of “safe sex” often focus on teaching young women to consistently use condoms and contraception during vaginal intercourse. These interventions, while useful, do not sufficiently recognize the range of protective behaviors young women routinely depend on while in sexual relationships. In this study, we draw on in-depth interviews with young women ages 18-28 ($n=17$) to examine their efforts and the work to achieve “sexual safety.” We found young women developed strict contraceptive regimens, controlled sexual desire until they were in a relationship of an appropriate length, and carefully selected sexual partners in an effort to feel “safe.” In our analysis, we focus on McClelland’s (2017) theory of sexual labor, which builds on Cacchioni’s (2007) notion of “sex work” – both of which identify the efforts required by women to become, remain, or refuse to be sexually active. The framework of *sexual labor* proved useful in helping to identify patterns that have become naturalized characteristics of idealized adolescent sexuality, such as “good” contraceptive behavior, “waiting” to have sex, and “careful” decision-making. We argue that these patterns demonstrate a level of vigilance in sexual relationships that has become part of young women’s repertoire of safe sex behaviors. We argue, however, this sexual labor remains unrecognized by “safe sex” campaigns and, as a result, young women’s sexual labor is often mistaken for a natural orientation towards relationship improvement and sexual gatekeeping, which discounts the gendered dynamics that shape women’s sexuality development. Without more attention to the sexual labor that women engage in, researchers and health advocates risk ignoring the full range of efforts and the toll of sexual vigilance that is part of heterosexual sex for some.