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RESOURCE REVIEW



## A Review of *History of Sex Education* by SIECUS

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### ABSTRACT

This article critiques the *History of Sex Education*, a publication by SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change (SIECUS). This document identifies the foundations of sex education in the United States. It recognizes the white middle class's centering within the historically racist, classist, and fear-based sex education. SIECUS utilizes this publication to explore the organization's history and its impact on the progress of sex education. Still, this history is missing recounts of the intersection of gender, race, and sex, including reproductive justice and notable organizations, works, and people.

### KEYWORDS

Sexuality education; sex education; sex ed; history; human sexuality; SIECUS

### Key points of the history of SIECUS—Sex Ed for Social Change

As of 2021, there is still debate about the necessity for comprehensive sex education in K-12 curricula. Simultaneously, protests are occurring against the inclusion of critical race theory in schools. These protests are set on the premise of excluding vital aspects of United States history as it factually occurred and the implications that still exist and impact everyone currently. Ironically, socially just, inclusive, and comprehensive sexuality education is an area in which the true history of the United States can be shared. Additionally, evidence shows that comprehensive sex education is essential for the health and well-being of young people despite efforts against it (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The *History of Sex Education*, a publication by SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change (SIECUS),<sup>1</sup> provides a perspective of the history of sex education in the United States. The SIECUS document authors, whose specific names are not included in the publication, address six critical areas within the history of sex education, (1) The social hygiene movement, (2) Moving beyond disease prevention, (3) The sexual revolution and culture wars, (4) AIDS changes the debate, (5) The fight between abstinence-only and comprehensive sexuality education, and (6) Looking forward: sex ed as a vehicle for social change. They propose that sex education can be a

vehicle for greater social change rather than its historical use as a solution for society's sex and relationship problems.

SIECUS does a good job highlighting the dominance of the white middle class's fear-based, racist, classist, and sexist worldviews, policies, and delivery of sex education. SIECUS makes sure to mention the eugenics movement, which occurred before the social hygiene movement, as a way to make sure only the white, middle-class Anglo Saxons reproduced. SIECUS notes the lack of racial and gender inclusion within organizations, such as the Boy Scouts, American Social Hygiene Association, the National Education Association, and the impact of segregation during this time. The authors tellingly acknowledge the continued investment in racism and segregation and the fear-based education attached to marriages outside of one's race, religion, or nationality during the rise of family life education programs during World War I. Throughout the publication, SIECUS also effectively highlights the several sex education-specific policies and policies that impact sexual health and rights. Sex educators and leaders must be aware of legislation in place that profoundly impacts our work and cultural norms. This includes federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programming, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program and welfare reform.

This publication provides essential detail about the progressive impact of SIECUS on sex education. After laying the foundation for the rise of sex education, SIECUS centers its efforts, including developing the first *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education K-12*. These guidelines remain a significant foundation for sex education in the United States during the twentieth century. The authors explain how SIECUS and its partners later promoted accurate and inclusive comprehensive sex education. SIECUS partnered with Advocates for Youth and Answer to create the Future of Sex Education (FoSE), which would focus on institutionalizing sex education in schools. Together they published the *National Sexuality Education Standards* (NSES) in 2012, which supported consistent messaging for K-12 sex education. The NSES were updated in 2020, and recent data suggests that "more than 40% of districts in the U.S. have adopted the NSES" (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). FoSE's efforts continue to include historically marginalized communities, specifically LGBTQ youth and youth of color.

### **Critique and missed opportunities**

This document serves as an additional resource needed to increase knowledge about sex education and is critical for professionals and the overall community. While SIECUS' *History of Sex Education* is a document that

provides a perspective of the vital history of sex education, it is, unfortunately, missing historical information that addresses the intersection of gender, sex and race. Unfortunately, much of the historical recounts in the document appear to be from a cisgender, heterosexual, white lens and perspective. This perspective does not specify the inequities for marginalized people during the referenced periods, which is important to the full history. While the publication specifies its focus is on sex education in the United States, it omits any reference to other nations, which suggests the history of sex education begins and ends in the United States. Additionally, this history focuses on school-based education and overlooks the contributions of community-based sex education efforts. It also omits the long history of professional organizations and some of the most recent organizations and collectives that have impacted sex education significantly. SIECUS does a great job of recounting the background that leads neatly to their history and present day. Thus, the title of this publication may be misleading and should make clear that the organization's efforts will be centered.

In this publication, SIECUS does not define reproductive justice or acknowledge the powerful organizations leading this movement and theoretical framework. In 1994, the term *reproductive justice* was coined by a group of Black women in Chicago. Reproductive justice includes “the right not to have children using safe birth control, abortion, or abstinence; the right to have children under the conditions we choose; and the right to parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 14). This term, framework, and movement is critical to the history of sex education. In 1997, SisterSong was the organizational manifestation of this term, composed of 16 women of color-led organizations (Roberts, 1997, p. 50). SIECUS' *History of Sex Education's* conclusion states, “Sex education has the power to create a culture shift across the United States—granting all people the ability to experience and enjoy sexual and reproductive freedom, as they define it for themselves.” This hope for the future is included in the fight for reproductive justice. For this ideal to come to fruition, we must reflect on the history of control and violence over marginalized people's bodies. This control includes withholding comprehensive and inclusive sex education.

There are, however, two areas where the Black population in the United States is mentioned within the publication. In the “Schools and Character Building Organizations” section, SIECUS includes an excerpt about the lack of effort dedicated to sex education for Black people and the hesitation for Black medical professionals to invest in sexual education due to the fear of negative stereotypes. The historical context of the hyper-sexualization of Black people and the consequential adoption of respectability politics is essential for understanding this trepidation. Respectability politics is the

adjustment of visible appearance, behavior, and speech with the goal to minimize discrimination and prejudice. This form of hyper vigilance creates a semblance of safety for the families and communities of those with marginalized identities. Also, this vigilance may be applied to avoiding certain social situations or spaces (Lee & Hicken, 2016). Due to the neglect of accessible education on reproductive justice and the persistent devaluing of critical race theory, many Americans are left without accurate knowledge about this historical impact on today's sex education.

In *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts (1997) states, "The social order established by powerful white men was founded on two inseparable ingredients: the dehumanization of Africans based on race, and the control of women's sexuality and reproduction" (p. 23). This dehumanization and control of enslaved Africans were present in physical and sexual exploitation and abuse, including the inherent lack of bodily autonomy that defines slavery. Black women were believed to be "naturally lascivious" (p. 31) and thus unable to be raped, while Black men were labeled violent and sexually predatory. The "myth of the welfare mother," which SIECUS briefly includes in the "The Rise of the Abstinence-Only Movement" section, is a part of this nation's record of harmful narratives. Still, this section does not go forward to explain the long-lasting consequences of these tropes—the Black community's access to education, resources, quality of life, and dignity. These vile stereotypes continue to be reflected in policies, or lack thereof, and institutional practices.

The *History of Sex Education* references the eugenics movement and that it promotes white, middle-class reproduction and the anti-sex work agenda, but does not explicitly state the violence of forced sterilization against women of color and women with disabilities. For example, by the 1970s, one-quarter of the Indigenous population in the United States was sterilized (Roberts, 1997, p. 65). There is also no mention of the coercive promotion of long-lasting contraceptives to women of color and the tendency for providers to refuse their removal or to charge very high removal fees (Roberts, 1997). This history is an essential component of culturally responsive, inclusive, intersectional comprehensive sex education. Including the history of slavery across the diaspora, eugenics, and the sterilization of marginalized women should not be optional or minimal when recounting the history of sex education. Culturally responsive, relevant, and medically accurate education about our bodies gives us the power to make informed decisions.

It is important to note the sacrifices of Black and Brown bodies and the impact of eugenics on communities of color and other marginalized communities. This is critical to the history of sex education and educational content for both sex educators and their learners. Of note is the continuous

use of individuals from communities of color serving as community-based sex educators. This was most noted during the Negro Project led by Margaret Sanger in many southern states (Roberts, 1997). The SIECUS history falls short in the recollection of Margaret Sanger's eugenicist efforts that specifically targeted women of color, stereotypically deemed as hypersexual. While some history has praised Sanger for working alongside Black leaders, she is also responsible for causing a great deal of harm to Asian American, Black, Indigenous, and Latino people. Sanger was most associated with prominent organizations that believed the world would be better if white, middle-class individuals reproduced more. Under the guise of safety and the idea of women's freedom, Sanger led a eugenics-focused agenda (Roberts, 1997). Seeking access to birth control and other medical services with private grant funding, she led the demonstration project utilizing Black clergy as liaisons. Some of the original community-based sex educators were Black fieldworkers in the South who were used as educators for the project.

Also missing from this SIECUS history is the establishment of other leading organizations in sexuality, including the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality (SSSS), the first national organization of sexual scientists established by Albert Ellis, a psychotherapist (Reiss, 2006). Additionally, after SIECUS was formed, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) was founded in 1967 by Patricia Schiller. It was formally known as the American Association of Sex Educators and Counselors (AASEC), then later included sex therapy, becoming AASECT. AASECT set out to be an association distinct from marriage and family counseling, social work, and nursing. There is value to having these organizations establish sexuality as a discipline, advance research, create collegial support and create infrastructure for future professionals (Brown, 1981; Reiss, 2006). Much of the community-based sex education resulted from the establishment of the Title X of the Public Health Service Act, which was signed into law on December 26, 1970 (Bailey, 2012). Another important organization related to sex education is Planned Parenthood Federation of America and its nationwide affiliates. When Congress enacted Title X, they mandated the creation of family planning programs that offered a comprehensive array of family planning methods and sex education in communities. In 1976, Congress expanded the Title X program to include community-based sex education for adolescents and adults (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014). At this time, Planned Parenthood began to focus more on community-based sex education programs and established a national education office that coordinated information and standards of education for their educators (Bass, 2021).

Essential to this history is recognizing the numerous institutions and universities that have been preparing sex educators for many years. To date, there are 24 graduate programs solely dedicated to providing sex education in the United States (Bass & Taverner, 2019). Missing is the establishment of the master's-level program in sexuality education at New York University in the Health Education Department in 1970 through a grant from the U.S. Office of Education. Additionally, in 1976 the University of Pennsylvania's sexuality program was established and then transitioned to Widener University in 1999 (Brown, 1981). In the same year, the Institute for Advanced Study of Sexuality in San Francisco followed with a program in human sexuality from 1976 to 2018 (Brown, 1981). Also not mentioned in the SIECUS document is the Institute for Sexual and Gender Health (ISGH), formerly known as the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota. It is one of the largest clinical, teaching, and research institutions in the world specializing in human sexuality. The program's formation began in 1970, and in 1973, it began offering therapeutic and educational services to individuals, later becoming a unit within the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health.

Further, numerous organizations, institutes, and retreats have provided professional development and preparation of sex educators, including the Teachers Institute in Sexual Health Education (TISHE). Institutes like the NJ TISHE, which started in 2002 (N. Gelperin, personal communication, September 28, 2021), were created for school and community-based sexual health educators. These multi-day professional development and skills-building opportunities examine and explore the principles of effective education with practice and peer feedback on a range of sexuality topics.

Additionally, there is a significant history of how the HIV/AIDS crisis created school-based and community-level sex education opportunities. It should be noted that within the SIECUS history, many of the current evidence-based curricula were developed and researched to provide meaningful and effective lessons for many educators. For example, Dr. Loretta Sweet Jemmott, Dr. John Jemmott, and Dr. Konstance McCaffree created the *Making Proud Choices* and *Making a Difference* curricula that have been adapted and expanded by educators nationally to be inclusive and culturally relevant for a range of audiences. While the SIECUS document mentions the advocacy, education, and heroic contributions of the former Surgeon General Dr. Joycelyn Elders, it fails to specifically mention her call to action to ensure communities of color, particularly African American and Black communities, were provided with comprehensive sexuality education. Additionally, in 2014, Dr. Elders collaborated with the aforementioned ISGH to support science-based sexual health education. The ISGH



established the Joycelyn Elders Chair in Sexual Health Education to foster change in sexual health nationally and internationally.

Furthermore, the SIECUS document does not mention the work of former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. More than twenty years ago, in 2001, he issued *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior*, a report to support national conversations on sex education. This affirmed sexuality as an integral part of human life and that sexual health includes physical and mental health (Satcher, 2001; Thrasher, 2009). The report and his leadership fostered more conversations in support of sex education. It was instrumental in creating some dialogue in many communities and homes.

### **Notable mentions contributing to sex education**

The SIECUS document offers an incomplete history of notable work of many individuals, organizations, collectives, events, and journals that support and influence sex education. While the additions listed in this article are not an exhaustive list, they add to the SIECUS document gaps. It also includes some people of color that make noteworthy contributions to sex education. Several groundbreaking educators and pioneer researchers such as Dr. June Dobbs Butts, Shere Hite, and Dr. William Masters and Virginia Johnson are absent from this document. Additionally, it is important to recognize Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his research team incorporated as the Institute for Sex Research in 1947 at Indiana University, becoming the Institute for Sex Research and renamed The Kinsey Institute for Sex Research in 1981. The document also excludes Dr. June Dobbs Butts, Dr. Gail Wyatt, Dr. Eli Coleman, Peggy Brick, Bill Taverner, Deborah Roffman, and Susie Wilson, who impacted sex education tremendously. It also excludes Brick, Michael McGee, Pam Wilson, and other instrumental contributors of the first set of *K-12 Guidelines for Sexuality Education* as part of a national taskforce coordinated by SIECUS. Despite their significant impacts advocating for, conceptualizing, and implementing sex education, they receive no mention.

The document erases the contributions of a range of some popular culture or more familiar sexuality educators for their roles educating the public on radio, television, podcasts, social media, and the Internet. Other notable organizations that continue to impact sex education present day that were omitted include the Women of Color Sexual Health Network formed in 2009, the Association of Black Sexologists and Clinicians and the *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, The Center for Sex Education and its National Sex Ed Conference, the *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* and its successor, the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*.



Other organizations excluded from this history include SistersSong, SisterLove, Answer, Advocates for Youth, Amaze, Scarleteen, and Sex, Etc. There are missed opportunities to uplift smaller organizations or collectives providing sex education and doing the important work of uplifting marginalized communities and providing sex education and professional development for sexuality professionals, like the Minority Sex Report, the North Carolina Sexual Health Conference, Partners in Sex Education, the Sex Down South Conference, Sexuality Liberators and Movers (SLAM), Sex Positive Families, the Transgender Training Institute, UN|HUSHED, and so many individual Black Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) sexuality educators.

## Conclusion

This article provided a review of SIECUS's *History of Sex Education* and additional information relevant to the history of sexuality education and the contributions of several key figures and entities. Overall, while there are some key areas of the history of sex education listed in the SIECUS document that are useful for understanding within the context of the United States, there are clear gaps that can be filled with the voices of known contributions to the profession and work that continues to advance sexuality education.

## Note

1. The organization was previously named the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. It changed its name in 2019 (SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change, 2019).

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