

No Sex, Please, We're Kyrgyz

Author: [IWPR](#)

Education officials remove "depraved" sex education book from the curriculum.

School may be over for the summer in Kyrgyzstan, but the education ministry is hard at work - recalling 30,000 copies of a sex education textbook following complaints from scandalised parents.

When teenagers go back to their classes in September, all copies of *Healthy Living* will have vanished from the school library. No longer will 13- to 14-year-olds be able to see descriptions of how to put on a condom, or advice on how to avoid venereal diseases. Only two of the book's chapters deal with sex education.

Education minister Ishengul Boljurova announced she was withdrawing the textbook in May - after it had been in use for three years. She said she had been prompted to act by the tens of thousands of outraged letters that had been sent to the government, protesting at the book's content.

The letters came from parents, teachers and Muslim community leaders, and some of them were published in the Kyrgyz-language newspaper *Agym*.

"The textbook *Healthy Living* is a real hotbed of depravity, covering topics such as pregnancy, sexual violence and venereal diseases," said one letter. Another one said, "Children must be shielded from these calamities not by learning about them, but through a state ideology based on morality and spirituality."

The decision to ban sex education from the classroom comes at a time when sexual diseases and teenage pregnancies are on the rise throughout Kyrgyzstan.

Indeed, the idea for a textbook dealing openly with sexual health was conceived after an outbreak of syphilis in the country in 1997, according to one of its authors, Boris Shapiro, who runs Kyrgyzstan's AIDS centre.

"We realised that the only way to stop the impending epidemic was to inform young people about the dangers and to teach them about safety," Shapiro told IWPR.

During the 1997 outbreak, Bishkek recorded 140 times its usual number of cases of syphilis. It was also around this time that the first cases of HIV were registered. There are now officially just over 400 cases in the country, though experts believe the true figure is roughly ten times higher. Over half the cases of HIV infection are placed among people aged 15-29.

Official figures also show that there are nearly 1,000 teenage pregnancies every year. Doctors report that many of these births are accompanied by medical complications, endangering the lives of the young mothers and their babies.

Research carried out by the non-government Women's Help Centre indicates that many of these pregnancies could be avoided if youngsters were educated about sex - yet hardly any of them are. Kyrgyz parents shy away from discussing such issues with their kids - many felt that was a duty best left to the schools.

Yet according to the research, schoolteachers, particularly rural ones, are equally cagey about teaching sexual mores - leaving children to learn about sex from pornography or from their friends.

The schoolyard is now set to become the only place where teenagers can learn about sex. The education ministry has acted on demands for sex education to be replaced by lessons in morality. After a roundtable in late June, it announced that Kyrgyz schoolkids are to be taught a new subject - Ethics and Aesthetics.

Explaining what the new subject would involve, Boljurova told IWPR, "We want to tell the children from grade 1 onwards about friendship, love, respect, proper conduct in society and family."

Sabyr Iptarov, who helped formulate the new subject, said, "It's our job as teachers to turn students into the sort of people who correspond to the national ideal."

Orozaly Badranov, a lecturer at the Islamic University, conceded that sexual education of some sort was necessary - but it might have to go under another name. "We have to call it something else - 'the ethics of husbands and wives'. And base the teachings on religious traditions," he said.

Boljurova also attacked the textbook for offending traditional Kyrgyz sensibilities. "This is especially clear in the section where grade 7 are taught how to put on a condom. Parents and religious leaders view this as depravity," she told IWPR.

"Everything could have been described discreetly, taking our mentality into account, leaving out the pictures. But the textbook uses drawings from European books," said Boljurova.

Shapiro is surprised by the decision to ban the textbook, particularly given the enthusiastic welcome it received upon its launch. He and his co-authors, Larisa Bashmakova and Gulnara Kurmanova, claim to have been sent a letter of thanks from every school in Kyrgyzstan.

The first they learnt of a campaign against the book was this year.

Shapiro believes his textbook may have become a victim of its own success. "This year, partly thanks to our book, the UN has given a grant of 17 million US dollars to help fight AIDS. This is a generous amount for a population of five million."

As head of Kyrgyzstan's AIDS centre, Shapiro would have had control over how this money could be spent - until the campaign against his book made his position tenuous.

"Someone decided they wanted to have my job and take control," said Shapiro.

Republican Party leader Giyaz Tokombaev told IWPR about a July 1 parliamentary session, in which the ministry of internal affairs recommended that the government exercise tighter control over financial grants given to Kyrgyz organizations.

"I think Shapiro needs to look deeper than the book for an explanation - probably someone needs the money and wants to take over his idea," said Tokombaev.

Bishkek high school student Alibek Isakov is full of scorn for the government's decision. "This is the 21st century, but they are trying to educate us using old methods. Removing the textbooks from the school curriculum won't make us more naive and pious," he said.

Leila Saralaeva is a journalist for the newspaper Delo No in Bishkek.

Location: Kyrgyzstan

Focus: Central Asia

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