

Lowering the age of consent: Sexual rights are human rights

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Law professor John Spencer, of Cambridge University, has created a huge controversy in the UK by suggesting a reduction in the current age of sexual consent of 16. His proposals, broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Iconoclasts programme, with my support as a co-advocate, have been savaged by The Sun and the Daily Mail.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mrd9g>

Much of the criticism has been sensationalist and has misrepresented the case for a lower age of consent. Whether we like it or not, many teenagers have their first sexual experience before the lawful age of consent. They should not be branded criminals, akin to paedophiles.

Sexual rights are human rights. They are not the exclusive prerogative of adults. Young people should be free to have sex and to experiment, providing it is consenting and no one is harmed.

As I explain in an article in the Guardian newspaper online,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/sep/24/sex-u...>

the best way to protect young people from peer pressure and sex abusers is not by threatening them with arrest, but by giving them honest, good quality sex and relationship education from an early age - including empowering them with the skills, knowledge and confidence to say no to unwanted sexual advances and to report sex abusers.

Criminalisation inhibits young people from seeking safer sex advice and condoms. It makes some afraid to report abusive relationships. They fear getting into trouble because they have broken the law. Education, not criminalisation, is the way forward.

Learn more about this issue and my other work on human rights on Twitter at

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<http://tinyurl.com/cj9y6s>