

MAY 2015

**PREGNANCY
AND LIFESTYLE**

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**

**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

MOTION:

**“PREGNANT WOMEN
HAVE A MORAL
RESPONSIBILITY
TO LEAD A HEALTHY
LIFESTYLE”**

PRODUCED BY

Institute of Ideas

bpas
British Pregnancy Advisory Service

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Foetal Alcohol Syndrome](#)

[Autonomy](#)

INTRODUCTION

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In 2014, a test case was heard in the UK Court of Appeal that sought to retrospectively punish a woman for drinking whilst pregnant, and which would have had enormous implications for women more broadly were it upheld [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. This case reflected an ongoing contemporary debate about the lifestyle choices of pregnant women. For some, the idea that women would choose to knowingly put the health of their unborn child at risk for the sake of a glass of wine every now and again is problematic, with one commentator opining that ultimately, “becoming a parent is linked to self-sacrifice” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. From this perspective, the unborn child should be the mother’s priority, above and beyond her own desires for a drink or a cigarette. But this opinion is not shared by opponents, such as writer and researcher Jennie Bristow, who asserts that we should trust women to handle their pregnancy in any way that they see fit, and suggests that attempting to police the lifestyle choices of pregnant women is “motivated by an unpalatable mixture of overblown risk avoidance, mistrust of mothers, and the official promotion of lifestyle conformity” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Although much of this debate focuses on the veracity of the science, and the claims and counter claims about the harms of drinking, smoking and consuming certain foods while expecting, the fundamental issue at stake in the debate is that of bodily autonomy, and whether this concept is altered for women during pregnancy. Does a pregnant woman have the right to make whatever lifestyle choices she likes whilst pregnant, even if they are unhealthy? Or does the unique, symbiotic relationship that she shares with the unborn child alter those rights in some way? Is it irresponsible and indulgent to drink or smoke during pregnancy and at what point, if any, should society or government intervene to curb behaviour considered unhealthy? Do pregnant women have a moral responsibility to lead a healthy lifestyle?

What does the science say?

The opposition to pregnant women drinking alcohol or smoking primarily centres on the affect these actions have on the unborn child. In the UK, official advice for smoking is that expectant mothers should give up [Ref: [NHS](#)]; for alcohol, if possible, women should abstain altogether, but if they must drink, it should be no more than one or two units of alcohol per week (equivalent to one small glass of wine) [Ref: [NHS](#)]. Echoing this view, writer Kalyn Weber observes that while we cannot completely avoid risk, we all weigh up the potential costs and benefits of our actions in our everyday lives - but in the case of expectant mothers, given the potential risks, she asks, “what is the real benefit of having, say a glass of wine a week when pregnant?” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. However, the evidence of the harm that unhealthy lifestyles present during pregnancy is itself contested. For some, the risks associated with moderate drinking are small, with much of the research in this area focused on the effects of heavy drinking, which is associated with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome [Ref: [NHS](#)]. American academic Emily Oster asserts that in society: “Being pregnant (is) a good deal like being a child again” [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)] and, as a result, she challenges much of the advice, such as avoiding caffeine and alcohol, on the basis that the risks to the unborn foetus are minuscule or unproven, and argues that women “want to assess risks for themselves and make their own best decisions” [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)].

Bodily autonomy: My body, my choice?

For some, the main issue is not the rights or wrongs of the scientific arguments, but the physical and moral autonomy of the female body during pregnancy. Advocates of bodily autonomy during pregnancy claim that women are asked to give up alcohol not because of the associated health risks, but rather because of an insidious moralising of women, in which they are constantly expected to: “have the right, responsible attitude to motherhood” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Some are surprised by the number of lifestyle prohibitions during pregnancy, and suggest that a less dictatorial approach is probably best, rather than how you eat during pregnancy being seen as “a reflection of your character and social standing” [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. For columnist Janet Street Porter, the implications for personal liberty are profound and far-reaching when society attempts to interfere with the autonomy of pregnant women by regulating their lifestyles. She argues that “a (pregnant) mother has the right to lead her life as she sees fit” [Ref: [Independent](#)], which means that even if she chooses to lead what others consider an unhealthy lifestyle during pregnancy, she is entitled to do so – it is her choice to make. Similarly, critics worry that if pregnant women are seen as “of secondary importance to (their) foetus” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], it would restrict the mother’s autonomy, and purport that such lifestyle decisions, healthy or otherwise, are not a “personal matter, but a moral absolute” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. In such an environment, opponents of the moralising of pregnant lifestyles argue that the end result is that “women are treated as little more than incubators, obliged to eschew certain pleasures for the sake of creating the optimal womb environment for the baby within” [Ref: [Reproductive Review](#)]. This could, in some cases, lead to

THE PREGNANCY AND LIFESTYLE DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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the state stepping in to legislate to 'protect' the foetus from the mother, thus creating a situation where "two entities...compete for rights in one body", as Ruth Graham observes [Ref: [Boston Globe](#)]. American states such as Wisconsin have already enacted foetal-harm laws [Ref: [News Bureau Illinois](#)], aimed at protecting the unborn child from the lifestyle choices of the mother – culminating in cases where women have been imprisoned for drinking and drug taking while pregnant [Ref: [Boston Globe](#)].

pregnant woman as "a sentient being" [Ref: [The Times](#)], capable of making rational decisions about her own body. So how should we view the lifestyle choices of pregnant women? Do they have a right to make whatever lifestyle choices they like in the same way that everybody else does, or do they have a special moral responsibility to the unborn child? And ultimately, does a pregnant woman maintain: "the right to make decisions – even poor ones – about her own body [Ref: [Guardian](#)]?"

A moral responsibility to the child?

Despite concerns from some about women's autonomy, others argue that expectant mothers do indeed have a moral duty to lead a healthy lifestyle. Writer Carrie Armstrong notes that the cultural attitudes which seem to suggest it's acceptable for women to drink in moderation during pregnancy actually amount to "denying the consequences of our actions whilst pregnant" [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. From this perspective, there is a clear moral imperative to lead a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy - and the catalogue of complications that can be caused by drinking [Ref: [RCOG](#)], smoking [Ref: [NHS](#)] and consuming certain foodstuffs [Ref: [NHS](#)] illustrate that the choices a woman makes during this time don't just affect her, they affect the unborn child too. Columnist Beverley Turner goes further, suggesting the responsibilities women bear in pregnancy are profound: "Abstemiousness in pregnancy is Mother Nature's way of getting us ready for the enormous sacrifices we will make thereafter. If we can't turn down a tippie for the sake of a baby that can't make a choice, surely we need to have a word about our maturity as parents" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. However, the result of this moral burden, some argue, is that we cease to view a

ESSENTIAL READING

[Alcohol and pregnancy](#)

Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists February 2015

[Drinking during pregnancy: what do we know?](#)

Bpas Reproductive Review 5 February 2014

FOR

[The gamble: drinking while pregnant](#)

Kalyn Weber *Huffington Post* 18 September 2014

[Why alcohol is hurting your baby](#)

Carrie Armstrong *Huffington Post* 20 June 2014

[Pregnant women simply don't have the 'right' to booze](#)

Emma Bartlett *Telegraph* 1 February 2014

[I drank alcohol throughout my three pregnancies, but should I have done?](#)

Beverley Turner *Telegraph* 31 January 2014

AGAINST

[If I want to drink, jog or eat sushi whilst pregnant, that is my decision](#)

Anniki Sommerville *Independent* 9 November 2014

[Why I drank whilst I was pregnant](#)

Michelle Ruiz *Cosmopolitan* 22 October 2014

[Women are second class citizens when pregnancy can make us criminals](#)

Jessica Valenti *Guardian* 16 July 2014

[Rule 3: Pregnancy does not damage your child](#)

Jennie Bristow *Spiked* 29 May 2007

IN DEPTH

[Great Expectations](#)

Economist 4 April 2015

[Take back your pregnancy](#)

Emily Oster *Wall Street Journal* 9 August 2013

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BACKGROUNDEERS

[“I thought Guinness was good for him” Mothers grief at damaging sons brain by drinking during pregnancy](#)

Lucy Waterlow *Mail on Sunday* 3 March 2015

[For pregnant women, two sets of rights in one body](#)

Ruth Graham *Boston Globe* 16 February 2015

[Alcohol and pregnancy: conflict and confusion](#)

Catherine Phipps *Guardian* 12 November 2014

[Pregnant women don't need a nanny state](#)

Janice Turner *The Times* 8 November 2014

[The nanny state will soon turn more women into criminals thanks to these draconian laws](#)

Janet Street-Porter *Independent* 7 November 2014

[Criminalising human behaviour makes a mockery of private responsibility](#)

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 6 November 2014

[Turning women into walking wombs](#)

Beverly Turner *Telegraph* 5 November 2014

[Pregnant women should not be policed by the hype over binge drinking](#)

Lola Okolosie *Guardian* 8 October 2014

[Tennessee criminalises drug related pregnancy complications](#)

Marika Seigel *Aljazeera* 30 April 2014

[Drinking in pregnancy: when is enough enough?](#)

Christina Franks *Huffington Post* 28 February 2014

[How much of pregnancy health advice is plain old prejudice and fear?](#)

Glosswitch *New Statesman* 28 August 2013

[On drinking while pregnant](#)

Dr Peggy Drexler *Huffington Post* 17 November 2012

[Alcohol during pregnancy is more dangerous than we can know](#)

Patti-Ann Bossert *Huffington Post* 19 May 2011

[In New York, pregnancy is a form of tyranny](#)

Alexandra Starr *Spectator* 7 April 2009

[The weighty responsibility of drinking for two](#)

Julia Moskin *New York Times* 29 November 2006

[Foods to avoid during pregnancy](#)

NHS

[Smoking during pregnancy](#)

NHS

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ORGANISATIONS

[Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists](#)

[Bpas](#)

IN THE NEWS

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[Teenager reveals horror of living with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome](#)

Daily Mail 24 February 2015

[Drinking alcohol during pregnancy could be ruled a crime](#)

Telegraph 2 February 2015

[Pregnant smokers quit habit if paid, says report](#)

Guardian 28 January 2015

[Drinking alcohol heavily while pregnant is not a crime, Court rules](#)

Biz News 5 December 2014

[A little alcohol during pregnancy does not affect birth weight, study shows](#)

Medical News Today 24 November 2014

[Landmark ruling could make drinking while pregnant a crime](#)

Daily Mail 4 November 2014

[Sharp rise in cases of foetal alcohol syndrome](#)

Guardian 21 June 2014

[Alcohol 'a crime' in pregnancy](#)

The Times 2 February 2014

[Up to 7000 damaged babies born to mothers who drink while pregnant](#)

The Times 26 January 2014

[Drinking whilst pregnant not linked to developmental problems, study says](#)

Huffington Post 18 April 2013

[Laws about pregnant women and substance abuse questioned](#)

Illinois News Bureau 8 November 2005

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**