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### A little band that tells girls, yes, you can

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When I decided to actively support a Southeast Portland girls-empowerment group, my purpose was to join a national movement that for more than 141 years was teaching low-income, black and Latino teen girls how to be "strong, smart and bold."

That's what I want for my 11-year-old daughter. That's what I wish I was while growing up instead of being a shy, clumsy, insecure girl who often walked with her head down.

I had no idea the initiative to encourage girls' self-esteem would supposedly be against biblical teachings.

Last month, I met Girls Inc.'s CEO, Joyce Roche, who was in town to launch Oregon's first Girls Inc. affiliate. She didn't seem demonic or misled.

The local nonprofit, now called Girls Inc. of NW Oregon, used to be known as the Girls Initiative Network. And it is funded, in part, through the city's Children's Investment Fund.

Its research-based programs, which deal with girl-to-girl aggression, drug and alcohol peer pressure, and economic and science literacy, are based in public and private schools in Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties. It also has a self-esteem program for girls in foster homes.

"Our priority is to provide safe spaces for these girls to grow," says Annette Kilnefelter, executive director of the local Girls Inc. "It's about providing that opportunity to say, 'Wow, I can do this.' Girls can be creative as opposed to being passive recipients."

Last week, though, at least two conservative organizations labeled Girls Inc. "a pro-abortion, pro-lesbian advocacy group." They are threatening a boycott of one of Girls Inc.'s financial supporters, American Girl, which sells children's books and collector dolls.

Like every other cause offering colorful pieces of elastic, American Girl is selling \$1 black bands with a half-dollar-sized, plastic red star. It plans to give Girls Inc. 70 cents of every dollar raised, plus a \$50,000 donation.

The "I Can" bands come with a promise card for girls to sign. It reads: "I can be myself, follow my dreams, and always do my best. I can reach for the stars, lend a hand to others, and be a good friend. I can make a difference! I promise to try."

But starting next Tuesday, the American Family Association, a Mississippi-based religious group, and the Pro-Life Action League, a Chicago-based anti-abortion group, are encouraging their members to boycott the bands, American Girl products and its stores.

Their justification for preaching intolerance and judgment is as shaky as a California earthquake. According to the two groups, Girls Inc.'s Web site -- [www.girlsinc.com](http://www.girlsinc.com) -- endorses abortion and encourages girls to have casual sex and become lesbians.

Here's what it actually says:

**Sex:** Girls Inc. "believes that for young people abstinence should be the first choice." But, girls also need access to non-biased information, contraception and counseling.

**Abortion:** Girls Inc. "supports a woman's freedom of choice, a constitutional right established by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973 in Roe vs. Wade."

**Gays:** Girls need "positive, supportive environments and linkages to community resources for dealing with issues of sexual orientation."

In other words, Girls Inc. doesn't pretend that young women instinctively know how to respond to all the modern-day peer and media pressures. So, in spite of all the violent, unhealthy and oppressive messages that teach girls to hate themselves and their bodies, Girls Inc. helps them value what makes them unique.

That's a lesson that took me decades to learn. And that's why Tuesday, I bought seven "I Can" bands for my daughter and six of my nieces.

The area's Bath & Body Works stores were told to pull the "I Can" bracelets. But you can still get them online at [www.americangirl.com](http://www.americangirl.com), or by calling 1-800-845-0005.

Oppression shouts "no." Empowerment gently reminds: "Yes, I can."

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