

Women's rights to sexual pleasure

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In the second decade of the twenty-first century, how much progress has been made towards women's claiming of their rights to sexual pleasure? Only in the late twentieth century was rape within marriage made an offence. Over the last few years issues of sexual harassment, consent, and body-shaming and objectification have become hotly debated issues. Can women say yes! yes! YES! unless they can say a firm NO and have that refusal respected?

It is unlikely that these days many women are still in the position of those in the first half of the twentieth century who, questioned by family planning doctors about the happiness of their sex lives, 'looked quite blank' and eventually replied 'Why, doctor? *What is there to enjoy?*'. Or said things like 'He's a good husband, he only troubles me once a week/very seldom/doesn't bother me much'. Surveys from the post-World War II era suggested a significant generational shift in women's expectations of mutual sexual pleasure within marriage. Whether these were in fact gratified is harder to establish. Do women in the twenty-first century feel that they are able to ask for what they want, to get their sexual desires met, to seek their own pleasures? It does not seem as if that millennium that the so-called 'second-wave' feminists supposed would have arrived by now has yet fully dawned.

By 1900 the many centuries during which women were considered sexually voracious by nature and a danger to men had long since passed. The stereotype of Victorian ladies exhorted to 'close their eyes and think of England' when their husbands expected their conjugal rights may be a post-Victorian construct, but the idea that women might have equal rights to sexual pleasure was largely a product of the twentieth century. The concept of women experiencing desires independent of men or marital status was only beginning to be articulated by women's rights advocates in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The campaign against the Double Moral Standard – which permitted sexual license to men while severely punishing any straying from the straight and narrow in women – was argued largely on grounds of morality and justice.

Only gradually and with a good deal of difficulty did women contend against overwhelming, often internalised, masculine models of what sex was, binary distinctions both between women and men and between 'good' and 'bad' women, and the oppressive weight of societal conventions, embodied in codes of respectability, silence and taboo. These were very lingering and historians have posited a 'long Victorian era' enduring to 1939 or even the early sixties.

In 1915 Stella Browne made the extremely radical case that 'the conventional estimate of women's sexual apathy and instinctive monandry is not true', and that there was 'a strong, spontaneous, discriminating... sex impulse in women'. She repudiated 'The division of women into two arbitrary classes, corresponding to no psychological or ethical individual differences: (a) The prospective or actual private sex property of one man. (b) The public sex property of all and sundry.' She even argued for the value of transitory encounters. Some years later she posited a bisexual female 'sexual epicure' alongside claims that masturbation was not merely harmless but a beneficial part of sexual life. But she was on the radical fringes of contemporary discussions about female sexuality. Very few committed publicly to such arguments whatever they might have conceded in private conversation or indeed, discreetly practised.

In the mainstream the subject was framed within marriage, if only for prudential reasons of avoiding censorship: publishers, fearful of prosecution, maintained their own protocols of what might and might not be said in print. A new genre of marriage advice literature may be considered the stealth approach to asserting women's sexual rights. In 1918, Marie Stopes's epoch-making *Married Love* came as a revelation to the post-Great War generation. This bestseller presented female sexual desire as a beautiful and powerful force, the suppression of which by society created many unhappy marriages. Stopes's picturesque imagery conjured up quasi-mystical ecstasies, but she described in clear and scientific detail precisely how women might be aroused and satisfied.

While this, and subsequent works in the genre, informed women of their own sexual desires, and that they should be responsive to conjugal advances, the pervasive assumption was that it was the husband's job to bring about a mutually gratifying act. Men were exhorted to care on the honeymoon when initiating their wives and to attentiveness to their wives' needs. Whatever the new emphasis put upon preparation and foreplay and the importance of the clitoris, 'sex' was still defined as the penetrative act culminating in male emission. Thus women's sexual rights were placed in the hands of the men they were involved with. Women might at least, as the novelist Naomi Mitchison did, provide their husbands with a copy of *Married Love* or van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* in order to provide them with enlightenment. Given widespread sexual ignorance and ineptitude among even well-intentioned men, the vision offered by these marriage manuals was somewhat utopian.

That most women came to marriage not only sexually inexperienced but without having consciously felt sexual desire remained an underlying theme well into the 1960s. Advice to teenage girls emphasised their responsibility to exercise control during courtship and to avoid inflaming susceptible male passions. The assumption was that girls was less likely to be 'carried away'. Evidence that young women were not passionlessly awaiting monogamous marriage was therefore disturbing to society and the basis of recurrent moral panics. During the First World War girls were alleged to be in the grip of 'khaki fever' and running after men in uniform. The sight of frenzied screaming hordes of teenaged girls at pop music concerts in the 1960s aroused agitated commentary. Indulging in 'petting' (non-coital sexual activity) became the subject of concerned warnings in the fifties and sixties. Even when the manifestations were not so flagrantly erotic the pleasures of young women were regarded with a dubious eye as liable to deprave and corrupt: dancing, movies, matinée idols, crooners, romance novels. (Even though romance novels were for decades generally careful to observe the moral conventions: only with the seventies did 'bonkbusters' and 'bodice-rippers' finally bid adieu to the virginal heroine.)

Endeavours to reconfigure female desire within conventional heterosexual marriage were, relatively, acceptable to society as a whole. Persisting societal taboos on women's sexual activity outside that boundary – the stigma on divorce, punitive attitudes towards unmarried motherhood, along with the limited availability of contraception, concerns over its reliability, and the illegality of abortion – placed significant limits on most women's ability to explore their sexuality, always strongly inflected by class and status. A small vanguard of women, enabled by the new social and economic freedoms available to women, armed with some knowledge of contraception (and possibly access to information on abortionists) was engaging in relationships outside marriage. It is not easy to establish exactly how sexually empowered they might have been in relationships in which they still ran considerable practical, reputational, and emotional risks. Even radicals who sought alternatives to conventional marriage tended to position these as 'open marriages' with secondary liaisons.

Female desires which could not be fitted into the conventional patterns were disturbing. Adulterous affairs, passions for younger men, men of different class or ethnicity, or for other women could blow

up into media furores about dangerous transgressive female sexuality. Edith Thompson was hanged in 1923 although there was no evidence that she had incited her younger lover Freddie Bywaters to attack her husband. But as a married woman who had continued working after marriage when this was very rare, and had written him passionately erotic letters, she was condemned even though Bywaters protested her innocence.

In 1928 a reputable publisher brought out a novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, by the already acclaimed author, Radclyffe Hall. It was a non-sensationalist plea for sympathy towards the 'female invert', i.e. lesbian. Favourably reviewed in literary periodicals, selling at a high price, it was already in its second printing when it became the subject of unwanted notoriety. Sensationalist journalist James Douglas trumpeted in the *Sunday Express* that it was 'A book that must be suppressed' and that he would rather give 'a healthy boy or a healthy girl a vial of prussic acid'. This almost certainly gave the subject of lesbianism far more publicity than the book had achieved, as did its ensuing trial under the Obscene Publications Acts. In spite of the eminent writers, scientists and opinion-makers prepared to testify in its favour the magistrate refused to hear their evidence and condemned the work as 'vile' and 'unnatural'. Sex between women was not itself illegal, unlike sexual relations between men. Women might live together for companionship or economic reasons, without transgressing conventional gender norms, in particular during the interwar era when so many potential husbands had been killed during the Great War. But making an open plea for the validity of female same-sex desire transgressed the taboo of silence.

Far from mindlessly conceding the Freudian theory of the overarching importance of the vaginal orgasm, throughout the fifties and early sixties marriage advice manuals continued to suggest that clitoral orgasm was at least a necessary introduction. It was also argued that if a woman could not achieve vaginal orgasm, it was desirable that she should have clitoral satisfaction. This was still, however, in the context of heterosexual penetrative intercourse.

Things began to change in the late 1960s. Theoretically 'liberated' by the advent of the Pill, many women discovered that this did not bring them sexual satisfaction but merely an expectation that they would now be available to gratify men's desires without being able to plead fear of pregnancy. There was an explosion of women's writing on the subject and an exploration of the myths and realities of women's sexuality. While for some decades sex advice had been stressing the harmlessness of masturbation, it was now advocated as a desirable means by which women could familiarise themselves with their own genitals and their responses. They were also advised to examine their own genitalia – emphasis being laid on the enormous variations in vulval anatomy. Women could cease being sexual objects and become, instead, sexual subjects.

This was happening in the pages of feminist periodicals and newsletters, where heated debates took place over what constituted feminist sex practice. Could feminists be in relationships with men: was it permissible without penetration? were certain practices between lesbians replicating patriarchy? These periodicals also acquainted women with the existence of vibrators – the most commonly available still very phallic in shape – and the mail-order firms supplying them. At a different level there was the inception of the first 'female-friendly' sex-shop chain, Ann Summers: while this operation initially encountered the resistance of women to enter these shops, the business found a niche in promoting parties at which volunteers could sell goods from its catalogue.

In the twenty-first century it is assumed that women have sexual desires and are capable of sexual pleasure. Lesbian relationships are far more common and can be solemnised in marriage, while women increasingly experiment with bisexuality: however, homophobia still persists. Sex-toys are widely available. Even so, reports, surveys, and anecdote suggest that the double standard remains

enduring and women are still judged on their sexual conduct. Women may not express the apathy of 'what is there to enjoy, doctor?' but in heterosexual relationships suffer an orgasm deficit and are more likely than their partners to engage in practices they dislike and tolerate pain during sexual activity. It is encouraging that with age women acquire more confidence in expressing their desires and getting them met, but accounts of the problems faced by young women in the age of social media are distressing. While it is a good thing that concerns over consent and harassment are being articulated, it is a great pity that these discussions are still needed and, indeed, that questions are so inevitably raised as to whether they have already 'gone too far'. Women's equal sexual rights are not, yet, taken for granted.

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