

The sexualization, objectification, and scrutiny faced by women in our patriarchal society have a multitude of negative effects on our conceptualization of women's sexuality. Women are sexually objectified and are often made to feel socially unsafe. They share sentiments of discomfort and dissatisfaction within their own bodies due to beauty standards perpetuated by society. These negative sentiments towards sex and sexuality are particularly prominent among heterosexual women. Many heterosexual women find their male sex partners to be dismissive of their pleasure. As a result, we find ourselves in a society of women who lack a sense of sexual entitlement.

In a phenomenon known as the orgasm gap, heterosexual women report experiencing orgasms at a substantially lower rate than their male counterparts. Approximately 65% of heterosexual women report achieving orgasm always or almost always during their encounters with men. Meanwhile, approximately 95% of heterosexual men report achieving orgasm always or almost always in their encounters with women. In a series of studies conducted by Armstrong et al., she analyzes sexual inequalities faced by women throughout the lifetime. In one study focused on college-aged women, orgasms were found to be more common within relationships than in hookups. Men in relationships express more investment in their female partner's pleasure, while men participating in hookups express little to no regard for the pleasure of their female partner. In a separate study by Armstrong et al. regarding the provision of cunnilingus, it was found that women participating in hookups must be assertive to get cunnilingus. In contrast, men's interest in giving cunnilingus in relationships sometimes overrides women's lack of interest in receiving it. Moreover, in the 1990 *Kinsey Institute Report on Sex*, after interviewing 2,480 married and divorced women, it was found that approximately 10% of women would "never experience orgasm in their life."

As a result of the data presented, women grow to place less importance on their own desires and orgasm achievement for their sexual satisfaction. Women are desiring sex less and less. In a series of interviews conducted by author Katherine Rowland, she shares a quote from one woman, stating “I might not even want to have sex—but if he wants sex and I give it to him then, yes, I was a good wife today.” With continuous reinforcement of the subordination of female pleasure throughout the lifetime, women often experience a nonhormone-related decrease in libido. Many even go to the extent of sharing the sentiment that sex is chore-like. What is the moral significance of this?

In a paper titled *The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm*, Mary Pellauer notes an important distinction within the phenomenon of sexual inequality. Pellauer states, “Women cannot take orgasms for granted. Men apparently do so, at least for most of their lifespan. Female orgasm does not come ‘naturally.’ We have to *learn* it...Many layers of interpretation swathe the experience of orgasm like veils or shawls—thus pressing us toward the second layer of problems” (165). Pellauer identifies the “second layer of problems” to be interpretive, expressing that many women “can’t talk about sexuality at all.” She cites social pressures as creating “internal inhibitions and self doubts.” In contrast, a small, other group of women express openness towards the topic of orgasm and sexuality. These contrasting responses to the topic reveal the vastly different attitudes towards and understandings of the female orgasm.

Pellauer identifies six aspects to clarify the experience of orgasm: (1) being here-and-now, (2) varieties of sensations, (3) ecstasy, (4) vulnerability, (5) power, and (6) nothing above can be taken for granted. In providing this criteria inspired by her own experience, Pellauer describes her sexual relationship with her husband, showcasing many of the internal issues regarding sexual entitlement mentioned above. She states, “my pleasure was important to

him; this was hard to accept...he was willing to persist in trying to bring my release/ecstasy, that he revealed in it: This shook me very deeply. It was so unexpected. My surprise about this says more about me than it does about him. I did not expect to be loved. I did not expect him to have the capability to put me before himself. I expected only to be secondary.” (173). She expresses experiencing this with her husband as an “instance of his vulnerability-to-[her]” reaching out to meet her “vulnerability-to-him.” In suppressing female sexuality, are we teaching women that they are not deserving of love? Are we implying that the female orgasm is a good that can only be afforded to us by men? Are we witnessing the erasure of vulnerability from intimate relationships? These notions are clearly extremely detrimental.

In response, Pellauer calls for a “multiplicity in feminist sexual ethics that can *at least* match the multiplicity of women’s sexual experiences,” identifying the concepts of trust, openness, and vulnerability to be key in this discussion (175). I support such an approach. Much of the intimacy of sex has been extracted from the act, leaving it to be seen as a transactional, mechanical ritual where heterosexual women tend to receive the short end of the stick. Though, this view cannot be more flawed. Women are equal sex partners. They, like men, are endowed with dignity. This ideology takes roots within Kantian ethics. Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative holds that we must always treat humanity as an ends, and never merely as a means. Many women are essentially expressing the sentiment of themselves and their bodies being treated merely as a means. Objectification, lack of care, and misuse are direct moral violations to this dignity which is inherent to us all.

The (heterosexual) female orgasm is not a gift from men. The orgasm is a gift from one’s *own body*. Women must be encouraged to take power within their own sexuality to advocate for their pleasure, whether that be in their encounters with men, women, or alone. We must cultivate

an environment of care where women believe they are worthy of love and pleasure. Women have the right to feel sexual entitlement. Lastly, this should not be a “taboo topic.” Sex is as natural to us as eating and sleeping and it ought to be treated that way, for men and women alike.