

## Short Communication

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## Observations of Inequality between Female and Male Sexual Pleasure: 'Good Enough' Vs 'Ideal' Expectations

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I pose a question for the readers. If I have a vulva, am I 'hard work', and is my orgasm 'less important' than that of a penis owner? I hope that for most, the answer is no, of course not. If you are a vulva owner who can confidently pronounce this, well done you. However, in my practice I commonly observe cognitive dissonance. If our sexual pleasure is equal, why have I bore witness to female clients disproportionately dismissing their orgasms in comparison to their male counterparts? Cue the broken record of female pleasure... "It's taking a while, don't worry about me". The orgasm gap grows.

Another question to consider. If a vulva owner doesn't 'mind' the gap, is it still an issue? Let me preface this by saying, if you are a female experiencing less orgasms than a male, there is no expectation of dissatisfaction. Sexual wellbeing is not a checklist, a points system, or a yes or no answer. It is dynamic, subjective, and entirely yours to define. The purpose of this communication is not to plant seeds of doubt. It is to broaden your understanding of how unequal expectations of female and male pleasure came to be, and how 'good enough' expectations of female pleasure versus 'ideal' expectations of male pleasure may limit female sexual expression and empowerment.

If the orgasm gap is the smoke in the distance, the roaring fire below is the socialisation of inequality between female and male pleasure. Inequality between the sexes is a familiar concept, in some instances so ingrained in our psyche that we do not question seemingly obvious biases. As I write, my experience as a female is evoked. I make a deliberate effort to order "female" above "male" in my sentence structure, as opposed to "male and female". Why? Because inequality is that subtle. Female and male. Female and male. I urge you to repeat it until it feels "normal".

In the therapy room, unequal expectations of female and male sexual functioning manifest as subtle differences in levels of distress between vulva and penis owners. Consider the following example. A cis, heterosexual female and male couple present for psychosexual therapy. The male discloses experiencing erectile dysfunction, which has resulted in inability to orgasm. He describes experiencing significant distress and avoidance of partnered sexual activity. During sexual history taking, the female partner discloses she has not experienced orgasm in some time.

Despite being pained by this, she did not seek help, as she felt it was "common" and "expected", and that female pleasure is "a bit hard to come by". This is a frequently occurring presentation. We have a male partner for whom sexual dysfunction has rattled to the core, and a female partner who for an extended period of time had not experienced orgasm, and was so adapted to the situation that until prompted, had not since considered her pleasure.

I find myself inundated with advertisements for Viagra and Cialis, hailed as shameless and quick fixes for erectile dysfunction and male anorgasmia. Unfortunately, there is no equivalent for female arousal and anorgasmia issues. The abundance of pharmacology for male sexual dysfunction spotlights the normality of it all, while unfortunately, female sexual dysfunction continues to exist in the shadows. I believe the stigma around female pleasure also negatively influences help seeking and timing of treatment. I have observed male clients presenting to sex therapy after a few weeks of sexual difficulties, while female clients more often present to sex therapy having almost made their peace with the situation. Years, not weeks, have passed by. Having normalised variations of male sexual functioning is a fantastic achievement, however female sexual functioning remains stigmatised. As a society, we need to see female pleasure, in all its many forms, accepted and embraced, lest the pleasure, orgasm, and treatment gap remain.

If I have a vulva, am I 'hard work', and is my orgasm 'less important' than that of a penis owner? Not all females chasing that elusive orgasm will experience distress. Each person experiences and prioritises sexual pleasure differently. However, I enthusiastically challenge the belief that 'common' is 'normal'. A 'common' experience does not constitute a 'normal' one. Building upon this statement, a difficult experience does not render it unworthy of effort. This takes us to the female orgasm. As a society, we hold certain attitudes and biases about female pleasure, which predispose its dismissal. For example, the attitude that the female orgasm is 'hard work'. Respectfully, the vulva is not to blame. I am certain that many females have experienced unwelcome thoughts of their orgasm 'taking too long' during partnered sex. My question for those that resonate... Whatever made you believe that female pleasure is something to get 'over and done' with? Something to rush along so as not to be inconvenient? My advice... Be inconvenient. Ask questions, advocate, and be loud, inside and outside the bedroom.

If I have a vulva, am I hard work? Possibly. Does that mean my orgasm is 'less important' than that of a penis owner? Absolutely not.

I have pondered why this attitude exists, and propose that society has socialised us to believe it so. Consider the following comparison between a female and a male on the cusp of sexual development and exploration. In some families, female sexual pleasure is not only frowned upon, but also prohibited. Per say the parents of a daughter burst into her bedroom while she explores her vulva. The parents react with shock, and instruct her to stop her unladylike behaviour. The daughter feels confused, embarrassed, and guilty – her parents' reactions have made her think she has done something wrong. Potentially unknowingly, the parents have implied that masturbation is "dirty" to their daughter. Consider the daughter, who at a young and impressionable age, now feels ashamed of her vulva. She attends secondary school, and the friendship group does not talk about masturbation, only to giggle and exclaim "yuck". Eventually the daughter becomes sexually active, yet is unsure how to communicate how she would like to be touched. An orgasm is a foreign concept. Confusion and frustration develop. "It was never like this in the movies!" Eventually, her sexual pleasure fades into the background. "Good enough", she says.

On the contrary, a young male is interrupted masturbating in his room. Their parents laugh, "boys will be boys" they say, as they advise their son that Dad is here to talk if he has questions. The friendship group commend and celebrate his sexual development. He feels confident in the normalisation of his pleasure, and begins to use commercial porn, where the male orgasm is prioritised and the female orgasm rarely portrayed. Masturbation is not only accepted but also expected. The son grows to expect that sex ends with male ejaculation, and so he follows this sexual script throughout his adult years.

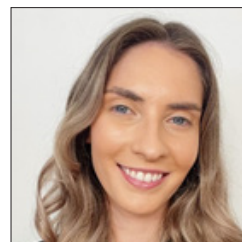
Though these examples are an oversimplification, the messaging is clear. Female and male expectations and experiences of sexual pleasure are different. Recall the female and male clients presenting to sex therapy. Both clients experience the same issue, however the male client experiences significantly more distress than the female. When did this phenomenon become the norm? And why? The bar for the male's orgasm was high, 'ideal', and the bar for the female's orgasm was lower, 'good enough'. Thus, the male had further to fall, yet the female's feet never left the ground. This is the inequality of female and male pleasure. In essence, do not blame the vulva for being hard work; blame the societal conditioning that propagated shame in female pleasure. With so many psychological barriers and blood flow directed to the brain, no wonder there is so little left for female genital arousal. In my opinion, female pleasure cannot be rushed. Despite learned rejection of female sexual pleasure, the female orgasm is important no matter the time it takes.

Unequal expectations of female and male pleasure impact upon sexual touch most intimately. A sexual script is the recurring pattern of sexual touch developed by sexual partners. It includes the sexual acts you give, receive, and share, and determines how the sex begins, ends, and what happens in between. For some, sexual scripts are safe, predictable, and effective, however are often guilty of being male-centric. A male-centric sexual script does not provide equal opportunity for the experience of pleasure. The "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach to sexual intimacy leaves little wiggle room for new stimulation and sensation, and constitutes a significant barrier to pleasure if left unchecked.

When we hold in our minds a rigid sexual script and focus on delivering the performance of our lives, we forget to enjoy the moment. When following a sexual script, we cannot fully immerse ourselves in the intimacy, for fear we are spending too much time in one sexual act, and not saving ourselves for the next. I believe sexual scripts disproportionately limit female pleasure in F/M sexual partners. An obvious example of this is when partners skip foreplay and hurry to penetration. The male partner is more likely to experience an orgasm, and the female partner less likely. Another example, when the female partner performs oral sex on the male partner, and does not receive oral sex herself. If the couple proceed to penetration, the male partner has received more stimulation than the female partner, however, the couple both expect to reach orgasm at the same time.

This is a problematic expectation. Experiences like these contribute to vulva owners forming conclusions that something is 'wrong' with them, or that they are 'broken', and further development of guilt and shame around sex. It is a heartbreaking disclosure to hear in the therapy room. The statement that vulva owners in these examples are 'too hard' could not be more incorrect. What is more likely in these examples is that the sexual script did not allow for sufficient female arousal. A client worded this beautifully recently. "We both arrive at the same destination, but your route is direct, and mine is the scenic route". A very insightful observation. A plus.

The female orgasm is no less important than the male orgasm; however, it is more readily dismissed in the bedroom. I remain steadfast in educating my clients about inequality between female and male sexual pleasure, and assisting those who seek to re-introduce, or introduce for the very first time, female sexual pleasure into their lives. To reiterate, this paper does not propose that those noticing changes in their sexual functioning should or will experience distress. Sex is what you make of it and an orgasm is not the goal of sex. If you are happy with your sex life, by all means, keep pushing on. However, if you are a vulva owner and consider yourself 'hard work', I hope this communication has resonated and prompted thought. Your orgasm is not 'less important' than that of a penis owner, we simply need to begin noticing, voicing, and challenging the inequalities at play.



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