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Inequalities in Heterosexual Sex
and How We Can Become Equals

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty and the Honors Program
Of the University of San Diego

By
Sophia May Bierly
Women's and Gender Studies
2021

Introduction

In fall 2021, the social media app Tik Tok erupted with public reactions when a man posted a video asking (straight) women to explain how sex feels for them. Women's responses came flooding in:

“You know when you do a group project, but in order to finish, you end up doing all the work yourself? Kind of like that...” (becki_w_the_good_hair).

“Like you're waiting for the beat drop but it never happens,” (caseyorellana02).

“When someone is scratching your back and misses the part that is actually itchy,” (addison.lucie).

“It's like when you and your partner get a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle with good intentions, but you know they're never gonna actually sit that long with you to finish it,” (bricstr).

“It's like when you're telling a story and someone cuts in and talks over you and you don't get to finish your story,” (420ismydinnertime).

“When you're craving your favorite food all day you had in the fridge, only to find out someone else finished it, leaving you nothing,” (gigineveah).

“When you see your server with food, but then he walks to a different table,” (rainepd).

“When you waited 45 minutes for the DVD logo to hit the corner of the screen and it hits the side,” (kaleidohope99).¹

¹ Emanuel, Daniella. “Straight Women on TikTok Are Describing What Sex Is like with Men, and It's Pretty Depressing.” BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed, October 5, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/daniellaemanuel/straight-women-tiktok-sex>.

These women used ordinary everyday experiences to express their experiences of lack of reciprocity, selfishness, men's lack of knowledge, and their disappointment when having sex with men. These women were discussing the problem of sexual inequality in heterosexual sex.

When sex is consensual, reciprocal, and affectionate, it is pivotal to relationship satisfaction and well-being.² However, this ideal scenario is rarely achieved. Instead, sexual inequality is the reality. Sexual inequality is the interrelated devaluation of women's sexual pleasure and men's sexual entitlement. Sexual inequality is a form of gender inequality, denying women of their dignity and agency as whole human beings through sexual objectification.

In this paper, I will reveal the problem of sexual inequality through social expectations to follow the heterosexual sex script, the misogynist colloquial definition of sex, the pleasure gap, and the comparatively low frequency of cunnilingus. Sexual inequality is social inequality and is, therefore, a political problem. For heterosexuals, sex is entirely based on gender differences.³ Therefore, in sexual experiences, how an individual understands their gender influences the way they behave during sex.⁴ This leads to women's internalization of sexual inequality and consequential objectification of women. I will discuss two specific forms of objection: the stigma against women's vulvas and social sexual coercion.⁵ After bringing clarity to the problem of sexual inequality, I will explain the alternative, sexual equity, the equal prioritization of women and men's pleasure. Equitable sex is a challenging but urgent prerogative. While individuals

² Debrot, Anik, Nathalie Meuwly, Amy Muise, Emily A. Impett, and Dominik Schoebi. "More Than Just Sex: Affection Mediates the Association Between Sexual Activity and Well-Being." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 43, no. 3 (2017): 287–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216684124>.

³ Learning, Lumen. "Introduction to Sociology: Sex and Sexuality" Lumen. Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sociology/chapter/sex-and-sexuality/>.

⁴ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁵ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 5.

need to practice equitable sex, we cannot expect people to develop a passion for this alone. The government owes us comprehensive sex education that illuminates sexual inequality and teaches the behaviors that lead to equitable sex.

Analysis of sexual inequality is pertinent. There is a national sentiment that “sexism is no longer a societal problem [but] gender inequity and sexist attitudes toward women persist, even among younger generations of adults.”⁶ While there have been major improvements in men’s participation in family life and women’s participation in the workforce in the past five decades,⁷ the United States has not reached gender equality. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2019, women made 82 cents compared to every dollar men earned with the problem only worsening amid the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸ There is also a clear gender difference in career placement. Women largely fill jobs characterized as, “people-oriented and thus non-STEM fields,” which have drastically lower incomes.⁹ Even as women begin to enter male-dominated fields, women rarely hold high-ranking positions. In 2020, women held only 7.4% of the board of directors’ seats for Fortune 500 companies in the United States.¹⁰ While workplace equity efforts struggle to progress, social equity lags far behind the workplace.

⁶ Lachance-Grzela, Mylène, Bingyu Liu, Andréanne Charbonneau, and Geneviève Bouchard. “Ambivalent Sexism and Relationship Adjustment among Young Adult Couples: An Actor-Partner Interdependence Model.” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, (April 2021): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211005549>.

⁷ Lever, Janet, David A. Frederick, and Rosanna Hertz. “Who Pays for Dates? Following Versus Challenging Gender Norms.” *SAGE Open*, (October 2015): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015613107>.

⁸ Laughlin, Lynda, and Megan Wisniewski. “Unequally Essential: Women and Gender Pay Gap During COVID-19.” The United States Census Bureau, March 29, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/unequally-essential-women-and-gender-pay-gap-during-covid-19.html>.

⁹ Overall, Nickola C., and Matthew D. Hammond. “How Intimate Relationships Contribute to Gender Inequality: Sexist Attitudes Encourage Women to Trade Off Career Success for Relationship Security.” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2017): 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732217745096>.

¹⁰ Hinchliffe, Emma. “The Number of Women Running Fortune 500 Companies Hits an All-Time Record.” *Fortune*. Fortune, May 20, 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/05/18/women-ceos-fortune-500-2020/>.

The battle for gender equity focuses on economics and political power.¹¹ These are necessary pursuits in which success is tangible and solutions are feasible. However, after over a century of efforts, progress is dwindling, because social equality, the root of the problem, is not the focus. Gender studies scholar Julia Wood describes the current dilemma of social gender inequality in the United States:

“Patriarchy persists not so much as a matter of laws but as ensconced beliefs and everyday practices that continue to maintain that men are more powerful than women; women should defer to and please men; caring for others, including men, is a primary responsibility for women... This is practical day-to-day patriarchy, which is a system that is collaboratively constructed and sustained by individuals as they act and interact in their relationships”.¹²

Sexual inequality and social gender inequality are one and the same. There are political dimensions to private life and these dimensions shape power dynamics in intimate personal relationships and experiences.¹³ Patriarchal domination is both personal and political. Heteronormativity is the backbone of our society. Male domination pervades all aspects of personal life, dictating intimate relations between individuals, without their conscious awareness of their gendered actions, to the extent that self-aware individuals disagree with the values that

¹¹ “Laws and Policies: How We Work: Gender Parity in the United Nations.” UN Women. Accessed April 9, 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/gender-parity-in-the-united-nations/laws-and-policies>.

¹² Wood, Julie T. “Gender, Power, and Violence in Heterosexual Relationships.” Essay. In *Sex Differences and Similarities in Communication*, 2nd ed., 407. 3. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 2006.

¹³ Hanisch, Carol. “The Personal Is Political.” The personal is political: The original feminist theory paper at the author's website. Accessed October 13, 2021. <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

their actions reflect.¹⁴ Feminism demands that women's negotiations of their sexual lives are examined in order to understand gender power dynamics in the greater social sphere.¹⁵

Achieving sexual equality will rid society of the predominant performance of gender roles, therefore diminishing social inequality in the broader sphere. A 2012 study exemplifies the relationship between sexual agency and social agency, finding that "Women who received oral sex felt more agentic, assertive, skillful, and gratified than those who did not receive oral sex."¹⁶ Improving sexual equality improves social equality. There is no equality until there is equality in all aspects of life, and equality in sex is not a current battle.¹⁷ This paper intends to spark the battle for sexual equity.

Definitions and Disclosure

In this paper, I use the term heterosexual sex to mean sex between a woman and a man. I recognize that this term can be exclusive because not everyone who engages in "heterosexual sex" identifies as heterosexual. While there are terms in academia to describe women who have sex with both women and men (WSWM), I did not find any terms to discuss sexual experiences that involve a woman and a man, without declaring sexuality onto those individuals. Therefore, while this paper focuses on heterosexual sex, these themes can be applied to queer relationships as well. In fact, same-sex couples frequently perform heterosexual roles of top or bottom during

¹⁴ Benjamin, Jessica. 1988. *The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination*. New York: Pantheon Books: 175.

¹⁵ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

¹⁶ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 222.

¹⁷ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: preface.

anal intercourse,¹⁸ and this will be discussed in the following section. Sexual inequality in HS sex is a starting point to understanding the complexities of same-sex sexual inequality, which I believe is related to engrained heteronormativity in U.S. culture.

The definition of sex is disputed, but this paper applies a feminist definition. In this paper, sex refers to any physical, verbal, or visual erotic stimulation that is intended to arouse someone.¹⁹ This definition is intentionally broad in order to include all the ways in which people experience pleasure. To exclude behaviors in any of these categories would delegitimize sexual experiences. The common colloquial definition of sex refers solely to vaginal intercourse. This definition is rooted in misogyny and is discussed in the following section.

I use the terms “sexual act” and “sexual experience” with specific intentions. I say “sexual act” to refer to a specific activity that stimulates arousal, like one person using a specific part of their body to touch another person’s genitals. The purpose of using the term “sexual act” is that each person enjoys some acts and does not enjoy others, and enjoyment can differ based on the context of the act. I say “sexual experience” to refer to an arousing event with a start and finish, in which, many acts may occur during the experience. The purpose is to be able to talk about both broad individual acts that may or may not feel good, and an entire experience that may holistically be good or bad, based on the many acts that occur.

I want to acknowledge that rape is a sexual experience that one in five women experience in their lifetimes.²⁰ Rape is an extremely important aspect of sexual inequality in that the reasons,

¹⁸ Moskowitz, David A., and Christopher P. Garcia. 2019. “Top, Bottom, and Versatile Anal Sex Roles in Same-Sex Male Relationships: Implications for Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48 (4): 1217–25. doi:10.1007/s10508-018-1240-5.

¹⁹ Nagoski, Emily. *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021.

²⁰ “Statistics.” National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Accessed December 10, 2021. <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>.

methods, and contexts of sexual assault are rooted in misogyny.²¹ However, this paper focuses on seemingly consensual sex that people do not automatically view as problematic. The complexities of rape are important, but too big a topic to include in this paper.

For the rest of this paper, I will use the abbreviation “HS” for the word heterosexual. Further, when I say “HS sex”, I mean heterosexual sex within heterosexual dating and hook-up relationships in the urban U.S. in the 21st century. There are many subcultures within the urban United States, and I would like to disclose that while there are diverse communities represented in the data I use, the story is largely from young, white, straight cis-women. The data is also largely using samples of college students, and college students are still developing their sexual identities and learning what feels good for them. This is a drastically different story than those of middle-aged adults in different cultures. In the conclusion, I point to directions for further research that would address these excluded groups.

I specifically focus on sexual inequality in HS sex because of my experiences with men, and because there is abundant data on heterosexual sex. I have always lived in urban areas of the United States and I have experienced and seen sexual inequality in my own relationships with men and through my friends’ stories. These experiences lived and heard, showed me that something unfair is happening. People know that there is a problem and they relate when they hear others talk about it. But we only talk about it in small groups of other women. These experiences are representative of a greater community problem, and I want all people to see it this way so that sexual inequality can stop happening, and in the hope that sexual equity can be achieved.

²¹ Hill, Suzanne, and Tara C. Marshall. “Beliefs about Sexual Assault in India and Britain Are Explained by Attitudes toward Women and Hostile Sexism.” *Sex Roles* 79, no. 7-8 (2018): 421–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0880-6>.

Inequalities in HS Sex

Sex occurs in many contexts, but sex is ultimately rooted in the theoretical context of a romantic relationship. Hookups are a common experience of sex, and though there is no intention of a romantic relationship, societal rules about dating apply to hook-up culture as well.

Therefore, the basics of HS dating inequality must be clear in order to understand inequality in HS sex of relationships and hookups.

Dramaturgical Sociology explains the intimate dynamics between heterosexual individuals. Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology says that in everyday lives, people are like actors performing social scripts and playing roles for an audience of peers.²² Therefore, dating and sexual interactions cannot be understood merely as individuals' choices, because people are subject to sociocultural forces that pressure us to conform to socially acceptable behaviors. The HS dating script is as follows: women can signal interest in a man, but men are the date initiators and women are reactors, accepting or rejecting men's offers every step of the way.²³ Only men are allowed to initiate their romantic desires, so women do not have a space to express their romantic needs and wants, and can only react to what a man wants. The HS dating script includes that men are the ones to initiate kissing or sex at the end of a date.²⁴ Women do not have active agency in deciding whether a date leads to sex. Women can only passively react to men's desires in dating.

²² Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963.

²³ Mongeau, Paul A, Mary Claire Morr Serewicz, Mary Lynn Miller Henningsen, and Kristin Leigh Davis. "Sex Differences in the Transition to a Heterosexual Romantic Relationship." Essay. In *Sex Differences and Similarities in Communication*, 2nd ed., 341. 3. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 2006.

²⁴ Velten, Julia, and Jürgen Margraf. "Satisfaction Guaranteed? How Individual, Partner, and Relationship Factors Impact Sexual Satisfaction within Partnerships." *PLOS ONE* 12, no. 2 (February 23, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172855>.

The HS dating script is marked by chivalry, which maintains a hierarchy that socially subordinates women. Chivalry is not an act of respect for women, rather it assumes that women are weak and dependent on strong men.²⁵ HS dating is fundamentally unequal. Since sex is performed as an extension of romantic relationships, the sexist ideals of dating carry over to HS sex. Sexual inequality manifests in different ways than dating inequality, but lack of agency for women remains a theme.

The HS sex script is equally prevalent.²⁶ Men are expected to be hypersexual beings who always want sex.²⁷ A double standard is imposed on women, in which women are expected to be chaste and innocent at first, but with the slightest sexual initiation, women are expected to become hypersexual beings, desperate for a man's penis.²⁸ In the HS sex script, at the end of a date, the man initiates the sexual experience through kissing and or groping of the woman. A woman can either accept or reject the advances, but a good girlfriend says yes sex.²⁹ Sex begins with foreplay, touching or kissing of each partner's genitals, followed by vaginal intercourse, during which the man comes, and then the sexual experience ends. Sexual health author Laurie Mintz notes that

“In this traditional script, the man is responsible for the woman's orgasm and he ‘gives’ her one by lasting long and thrusting hard. The woman's role is to protect

²⁵ Digby, Tom. *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and Romance*. 65. New York (N.Y.): Columbia University Press, 2014.

²⁶ Lever, Janet, David A. Frederick, and Rosanna Hertz. “Who Pays for Dates? Following Versus Challenging Gender Norms.” *SAGE Open*, (October 2015): 13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015613107>.

²⁷ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

²⁸ Dines, Gail, and Robert Jensen. “Pornography and Media: Toward a More Critical Analysis.” Essay. In *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviors, and Society*, edited by Michael Kimmel and Rebecca F Plante, 369–79. New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2004.

²⁹ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

the man's ego by pretending to orgasm that way- instead of having an orgasm for real."³⁰

For women, the expectation is to please men by being sexually giving through manual, oral, and penetrative sex, minimizing their own desires and molding their behavior to fit men's fantasies.³¹

In engaging in vaginal intercourse, blogger Katriana Ciccotto reveals her experience saying,

"I have 10 solid years of experience in faking orgasms. In fact, when I think about it, I must have faked hundreds. It's likely I've faked more orgasms than experienced real ones... and it's even more likely that my lovers are blissfully unaware of their debt."³²

Faking orgasms is crucial to the HS sex script in that men leave the sexual experience satisfied that their penis made a woman feel good.

The HS sex script also extends to masturbation. For men, masturbation is considered unavoidable, natural, and is thus socially tolerated; for women, masturbation is considered disgusting and shameful.³³ Masturbation is a valuable part of sexual health. However, the reversal in value for female masturbation is a component of sexual inequality. Female masturbation is taboo in the urban United States because female masturbation does not fit into the HS sex script that women are not interested in sex until a man can benefit.

³⁰ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 128.

³¹ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

³² Ciccotto, Katriana. "Stories of My Fake Orgasms." *Naked Grapefruit*, March 4, 2020. <https://nakedgrapefruit.com/stories-of-my-fake-orgasms/>.

³³ Herbenick, Debby, Jessamyn Bowling, Tsung-Chieh (Jane) Fu, Brian Dodge, Lucia Guerra-Reyes, and Stephanie Sanders. "Sexual Diversity in the United States: Results from a Nationally Representative Probability Sample of Adult Women and Men." *PLOS ONE* 12, no. 7 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181198>.

The HS sex script is ingrained in the heteronormative U.S. culture and influences dynamics between same-sex couples. In male same-sex sex, men assume either a top, bottom, or versatile identity, based on how often the man uses his penis or his anus when engaging in anal sex. Male top and bottom roles are similar to HS sex roles in that the top is the primary receiver of pleasure and the bottom is the primary giver of pleasure, like how in HS sex a man is the primary receiver of pleasure and a woman is the primary giver of pleasure. A study by Moskowitz and Roloff on the construction of top, bottom, and versatile roles identified that masculine men are more likely to be tops³⁴ and that a man who perceives his partner to be highly masculine is more likely to be a bottom.³⁴ This finding demonstrates that same-sex couples take on HS mirrored gendered roles in which masculinity is related to receiving pleasure. Additionally, the study found that some men bottom with their partners, even though they dislike it.³⁵ So, like women, men who are bottoms also experience social pressure to participate in penetrative sex to please their partners.

The relationship between HS sex and same-sex sex assumes that a bottom experiences less pleasure than a top, which is not true in every case. However, there is a trend of one-way prioritization of sexual pleasure, rather than sexual reciprocity. The heteronormative value on the HS sex script impacts male same-sex couples too, leading to sexual inequality for same-sex couples as well. The HS sex script is extremely prevalent in U.S. culture and extends beyond sexuality.

³⁴ Moskowitz, David, Michael Roloff, David A Moskowitz, and Michael E Roloff. 2017. "Recognition and Construction of Top, Bottom, and Versatile Orientations in Gay/Bisexual Men." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46 (1): 273–85. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0810-7.

³⁵ Moskowitz, David, Michael Roloff, David A Moskowitz, and Michael E Roloff. 2017. "Recognition and Construction of Top, Bottom, and Versatile Orientations in Gay/Bisexual Men." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46 (1): 273–85. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0810-7.

Sex scripts are not followed one hundred percent of the time by one hundred percent of people, but they are the most common course of action. Men initiate sex two-thirds of the time and heterosexual hookups are twice as likely to happen in men's rooms.³⁶ When a woman and a man hookup, a man's reputation grows and a woman's reputation suffers.³⁷ The HS sex script dictates that sex is about men's pleasure, and women's pleasure is only welcome when it is a result of a man's penis.

As aforementioned, sex is a disputed term. While this paper refers to sex as any physical, verbal, or visual erotic stimulation that is intended to arouse someone,³⁸ this does not align with most people's view of sex. The colloquial definition of sex is just vaginal intercourse.³⁹ However, there are many types of sex. Cunnilingus is the stimulation of the female genitals by someone else's lips or tongue (oral sex received by a woman)⁴⁰ and fellatio is the stimulation of the male genitals by someone else's lips or tongue (oral sex received by a man).⁴¹ In a feminist definition of sex, cunnilingus and fellatio are types of sex. However, one study found that only about 27% of college students consider cunnilingus and fellatio as sex⁴² and low percentages are consistent among similar studies.⁴³ Byers, Henderson, and Hobson's study in 2019 found that

³⁶ Armstrong, Elizabeth, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty. "Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships." Essay. In *Families as They Really Are*, edited by Barbara J Risman, 362–77. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2010.

³⁷ Armstrong, Elizabeth, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty. "Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships." Essay. In *Families as They Really Are*, edited by Barbara J Risman, 362–77. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2010.

³⁸ Nagoski, Emily. *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021.

³⁹ Byers ES, Henderson J, Hobson KM. University students' definitions of sexual abstinence and having sex. *Arch Sex Behav*. 2009 Oct;38(5):665-74. doi: 10.1007/s10508-007-9289-6. Epub 2008 Jan 19. PMID: 18204893.

⁴⁰ Moran, James B., Zachary Airington, and Catherine Salmon. "Cunnilingus." *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, November 2020, 1. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_1713-2.

⁴¹ Sela, Yael, Todd K. Shackelford, Michael N. Pham, and Harald A. Euler. "Do Women Perform Fellatio as a Mate Retention Behavior?" *Personality and Individual Differences* 73 (January 2015): 61–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.09.020>.

⁴² Byers ES, Henderson J, Hobson KM. University students' definitions of sexual abstinence and having sex. *Arch Sex Behav*. 2009 Oct;38(5):665-74. doi: 10.1007/s10508-007-9289-6. Epub 2008 Jan 19. PMID: 18204893.

⁴³ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 221. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

almost one hundred percent of people believe vaginal intercourse is sex, and about ninety percent believe that anal intercourse is sex.⁴⁴ Sex is popularly defined as a penis penetrating a woman's body. This definition of sex reflects a view of sex that is rooted in misogyny. Intercourse is a reliable method for men to orgasm, but orgasm during intercourse is a rarity for women.⁴⁵ The definition of sex as vaginal intercourse excludes women's orgasms, making sex only about men's pleasure. Women's orgasms are enjoyed as a coincidental outcome of sex, but unlike men's orgasms, they are not essential to a successful experience.

This characterization is a socially ingrained value. In a qualitative study on women's negotiations of oral and anal sex, women described giving and receiving "oral sex as less intimate, less symbolic of love and commitment, and less mutual than vaginal intercourse".⁴⁶ Mutuality and intimacy are likely perceived from vaginal intercourse because it stimulates both a man and a woman's genitals. However, vaginal stimulation rarely leads to women's orgasms.

Men do orgasm consistently from vaginal intercourse, and thus, since vaginal sex is an expected activity in sexual experiences, men orgasm most of the time. In one study, ninety-five percent of women said their partner orgasms most or every time, while just fifty-seven percent of women said they orgasm most or every time.⁴⁷ The difference in frequency of women and men's orgasms is well studied and referred to as the pleasure gap.⁴⁸ The pleasure gap is largely due to the focus on vaginal intercourse, which rarely brings women to orgasm. Only about four percent

⁴⁴ Byers ES, Henderson J, Hobson KM. University students' definitions of sexual abstinence and having sex. *Arch Sex Behav.* 2009 Oct;38(5):665-74. doi: 10.1007/s10508-007-9289-6. Epub 2008 Jan 19. PMID: 18204893.

⁴⁵ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It.* New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 5.

⁴⁶ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁴⁷ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It.* New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 7.

⁴⁸ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It.* New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 5.

of women orgasm from intercourse alone, and about thirty percent of women orgasm from a combination of vaginal intercourse and clitoral stimulation.⁴⁹ Despite the ineffectiveness of vaginal intercourse on women's orgasms, the cultural value on vaginal intercourse prevails, leading women to feel inadequate when they do not orgasm during vaginal intercourse, which is most of the time. Vaginal intercourse is the end goal of the HS sex script, even though it does not bring both women and men to orgasms.

Women primarily orgasm from clitoral stimulation, meaning manual or oral sex.⁵⁰ But oral sex is less frequently performed, and neither manual nor oral sex are considered the end goal of a sexual experience. Experiences of oral sex are not equal for women and men. Cunnilingus rarely occurs in HS sex, and when cunnilingus does occur, it is either engaged as foreplay before vaginal intercourse or as reciprocation for fellatio.⁵¹ Both of these occasions are problematic. When cunnilingus is treated as foreplay, a woman's orgasm is not the goal, and thus significant time and energy are not spent on the activity. When significant time is spent on cunnilingus, it is frequently as reciprocation for fellatio, making cunnilingus a transactional experience rather than an affectionate experience with enjoyment for both people. Women are emotional laborers, and many enjoy the sexual act of pleasing their partners, which results in passionate thoughtful fellatio, but men rarely share this same devotion.⁵²

⁴⁹ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 12.

⁵⁰ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. "Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students." *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁵¹ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁵² Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

HS women give oral sex much more than they receive it.⁵³ Blogger Amanda Chatel expressed her frustration with a lack of cunnilingus by saying, “My first boyfriend never went down on me. Although he was totally fine with me going down on him, which I did begrudgingly, I never got any oral in return.”⁵⁴ Women feel overwhelming pressure to perform fellatio, but they do not expect reciprocal cunnilingus from men.⁵⁵ It is a good thing they do not expect it because they would be let down. One woman in a qualitative study described her lack of expectation for time centered on her pleasure by saying, “I don’t even expect them to go down on me. I don’t really get the luxury of having long encounters so I don’t require [cunnilingus] and I don’t expect it” (46 years of age, white, bisexual woman).⁵⁶ It is especially interesting that men receive fellatio more than women receive cunnilingus because women and men rate receiving oral sex as equally pleasurable.⁵⁷ Women’s orgasms are irrationally undervalued, and thus, less frequent.

Cunnilingus is a reliable method for women to orgasm.⁵⁸ However, cunnilingus is rarely a devoted sexual act in HS sex, and so women are not orgasming as often as men. Sexual acts

⁵³ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁵⁴ Chatel, Amanda. “Not All Women like Oral Sex, and This Is Why.” Thought Catalog, November 19, 2015. <https://thoughtcatalog.com/amanda-chatel/2015/11/not-all-women-like-oral-sex-and-this-is-why/>.

⁵⁵ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁵⁶ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁵⁷ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. “Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students.” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁵⁸ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. “Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students.” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

that please women occur less frequently, a woman's orgasm is not the end goal of sex, and thus women do not expect to orgasm in most sexual experiences. The pleasure gap is a devaluation of women's sexual pleasure compared to men's pleasure. In HS sex, women's bodies are objectified since they are used for men to orgasm, but the reverse is rare. Sexual inequality is social inequality.

Internalization of Sexual Inequality

Sexual inequality comes from the internalized "belief that women should orgasm from penetrative sex" and "the ideal that a woman's value comes from pleasing men".⁵⁹ We internalize this idea through a process called gendered socialization. Gendered socialization is the process by which we come to understand our lived experiences in relation to our gender. Sexual experiences in HS sex are one of the primary ways in which we perform gendered socialization, due to the engrained heteronormative principle that sex is entirely about gender differences.⁶⁰ Therefore, in sexual experiences, how we understand our genders influences how we view sex and how we behave during sex. Consider blogger Yale Wolf's explanation of why she had to be passive in sex, "In my first relationship, at 19, I absolutely could not use my words to express a desire for sex. It was such a taboo for me. I was a good girl and good girls weren't supposed to like sex."⁶¹ Yale felt that she had to act within certain limits of how women are supposed to behave during sex. Because society taught Yale that women cannot initiate sex, she refused to initiate sex, despite her desire to.

⁵⁹ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 5.

⁶⁰ Learning, Lumen. "Introduction to Sociology: Sex and Sexuality" Lumen. Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sociology/chapter/sex-and-sexuality/>.

⁶¹ Wolfe, Yael. "Why She Doesn't Initiate Sex." Medium, March 27, 2020. <https://medium.com/sexography/why-she-doesnt-initiate-sex-98adbe2d1bb5>.

Gendered socialization is a result of a myriad of sociocultural forces that objectify women, including pop culture and pornography. Heteronormative sex is viciously apparent in advertising. A 2021 study found that half of all print media advertisements portrayed women as sexual objects to grab readers' attention.⁶² Because women are constantly bombarded with images of sexualized women in magazines and movies, women put their focus on being sexually desirable rather than attaining their own sexual desires.⁶³ Numerous studies identify that media intake predicts sexual acquiescence in women.⁶⁴ Pop culture teaches women that their bodies are for men's spectating and that sex is crucial to attracting a male partner. Women internalize this messaging and engage in sex with male partners in hopes of being good girlfriends. However, in doing so, women are reinforcing the message that women are sexual objects for men to conquest.

Pornography is another major contributor to the objectification of women. For many young men, pornography is their primary source of sex education. These are the first images they see of sex and women's bodies. Experts on pornography and sexuality, Gail Dines and Robert Jensen, illuminate three main messages that pornography teaches about sex:

- “1. All women want sex from men
2. Women like all the sexual acts that men perform or demand
3. Any woman who does not first realize her desire for sex can be easily persuaded with some force. Such force is rarely necessary, however, for most of

⁶² “Sex and Relationships in the Media.” MediaSmarts, September 23, 2021. <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/gender-representation/sex-relationships-media>.

⁶³ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 9.

⁶⁴ Conroy, Nicole E., Ambika Krishnakumar, and Janel M. Leone. “Reexamining Issues of Conceptualization and Willing Consent: The Hidden Role of Coercion in Experiences of Sexual Acquiescence.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30, no. 11 (July 2015): 1828–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514549050>.

the women in pornography are “nymphomaniacs,” always on the lookout for sexual encounters and hyperorgasmic sex.”⁶⁵

As a result of watching porn, men learn that women enthusiastically want vaginal intercourse, and then women are hyper-aroused by men’s penises. Men learn that women are so pleased by a man’s penis that they will enjoy vaginal intercourse whether or not they originally express interest. This message reinforces the focus on vaginal intercourse during sexual experiences rather than sexual acts that lead women to orgasm and simultaneously promotes men’s access to women’s bodies.

Gendered socialization from porn teaches women that they are supposed to revel in vaginal intercourse and that if they do not, they are abnormal. Sexual health author Laurie Mintz notes that the “most common complaint women bring to sex therapists is the inability to orgasm during intercourse”.⁶⁶ Since pornography is focused on sexual acts that bring men pleasure, women are taught that they should be aroused by pleasuring men, not by receiving pleasure.⁶⁷ Pornography belittles women’s pleasure and teaches women that men’s access to their bodies should be prioritized over their own comfort and sexual pleasure.

Gendered socialization leads women to internalize sexual inequality, through intake of pop culture and pornography. Internalization of sexual inequality is damaging for women in a multitude of ways. I examine the stigma against women’s vulvas and social sexual coercion as two harmful consequences of women’s internalization of sexual inequality.

⁶⁵ Dines, Gail, and Robert Jensen. “Pornography and Media: Toward a More Critical Analysis.” Essay. In *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviors, and Society*, edited by Michael Kimmel and Rebecca F Plante, 369–79. New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2004.

⁶⁶ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 8.

⁶⁷ Beneke, Timothy. *Men on Rape: What They Have to Say about Sexual Violence*. New York, NY, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Society teaches women to be ashamed of their bodies. This is a major component of women's internalization of sexual inequality. Women face scrutinizing sexist and racist beauty standards in which no woman can succeed because the very standards of beauty pose contradictions, like having large hips and a small waist.⁶⁸ Women are constantly bombarded with sexual images of women's breasts and butts, body parts that arouse men,⁶⁹ but never see images of women's vulvas, the body part that is linked to women's arousal. There is a cultural stigma against vulvas that leads women to view vulvas as gross, smelly, and unclean.⁷⁰ This stigma complicates women's relationship with cunnilingus. Cunnilingus is a reliable method to reach orgasm for most women when they are in a setting of trust and comfort with their partner.⁷¹ However, since vulvas are viewed as gross, many women are anxious about men being so close to their vulva. Thus, women have difficulty advocating for cunnilingus and consequently, their sexual pleasure. Women have difficulty advocating just for their basic needs.⁷² Sexual pleasure is a complicated need, and so it is even harder for women to advocate for this. In a 1996 study, women revealed

“...that they would not be comfortable receiving oral sex from a partner unless they had just finished showering/bathing, due to feelings of self-consciousness

⁶⁸ Singh, Devendra, and Robert K. Young. “Body Weight, Waist-to-Hip Ratio, Breasts, and Hips: Role in Judgments of Female Attractiveness and Desirability for Relationships.” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 16, no. 6 (1995): 483–507. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095\(95\)00074-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095(95)00074-7).

⁶⁹ Davis, Stefanie E. “Objectification, Sexualization, and Misrepresentation: Social Media and the College Experience.” *Social Media + Society*, (July 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118786727>.

⁷⁰ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. “Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students.” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 27. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁷¹ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. “Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students.” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁷² Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie, and Mary Beth Wade. “Viewpoint: The Dilemma of Self-Advocacy for Women: Another Case of Blaming the Victim?” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 15, no. 2 (1996): 143–52. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1996.15.2.143>.

about the way they smelled. This interfered with their ability to focus on their own pleasure and led to feelings of anxiety when receiving oral sex was a possibility.”⁷³

The stigma against women’s vulvas interferes with women’s ability to receive sexual pleasure, which is already a rare occurrence. One woman expressed her anxiety by saying,

“I was always more inclined to give oral sex than to receive it. I always felt very self-conscious with a guy being that close to my vagina and seeing it that close. I always steer them away into not having to do it to me” (36 years of age, white, heterosexual woman).⁷⁴

Women’s pleasure is already undervalued in sexual encounters, and women’s insecurities about their vulvas make it more difficult to advocate for and accept cunnilingus from male partners.

Women internalize the idea that women’s vulvas are gross, making cunnilingus a burden on male sexual partners. Not only do women feel like their sexual pleasure is less important, but women feel like their own sexual pleasure risks turning off male partners. Internalization of the stigma against women’s vulvas gives women anxiety about cunnilingus, contributing to the pleasure gap, and thus, sexual inequality.

Internalization of sexual inequality also contributes to the complex problem of social sexual coercion. Regardless of direct pressure from male partners, societal standards for women socially coerce women into engaging in sex when they are not interested. For instance, women

⁷³ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. “Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students.” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 27. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁷⁴ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

are four more times likely than men to engage in anal sex despite disliking it.⁷⁵ A Swedish study found that pain during vaginal intercourse is highly prevalent in young women, yet almost half of women experiencing pain continue to have sex because women prioritize men's pleasure, not only over their own pleasure, but over their pain as well.⁷⁶ Discomfort and pain are viewed as normal aspects of sex to women that women often do not realize that there are alternative methods and alternative sexual acts that can allow for painless, enjoyable sex.

Women engage in unwanted sex because women internalize the belief that a primary quality of being a good wife, good girlfriend, or good sexual partner is frequent, passionate engagement in sex.⁷⁷ This comes from a culture that expects women to provide male partners access to their bodies and emotional labor by devoting themselves to men's sexual pleasures and fantasies.⁷⁸ Access to women's bodies is not enough to satisfy this ideal, women must act as though they enjoy pleasing men. This leads women to fake orgasms despite lack of interest and even pain.⁷⁹

Women's internalization of sexual inequality leads them to have sex more often and in more scenarios than they want. This social pressure can lead to sexual assault. One woman shared her story with Take Back the Night. She explained,

⁷⁵ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 223. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁷⁶ Elmerstig, Eva, Barbro Wijma, and Katarina Swahnberg. "Prioritizing the Partner's Enjoyment: A Population-Based Study on Young Swedish Women with Experience of Pain during Vaginal Intercourse." *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology* 34, no. 2 (2013): 85. <https://doi.org/10.3109/0167482x.2013.793665>.

⁷⁷ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁷⁸ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁷⁹ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

“It was my second summer as a camp counselor and I had a crush on a guy that I was working with. We would have days off and he invited me to come to a cottage with a couple of friends. Little did I know that I was the only girl who went. I felt the pressure to impress him, and the only way I knew how to do that when I was 16 years old was to interest him sexually. When it was about to happen, I said I didn’t want it anymore. He said he already had the condom on, so that it wasn’t fair to him. After it happened, he laughed at me and left the room. I had to sleep there that night because I had no where else to go. The next morning we all drove back to camp and he made me hug him before I left. I’m writing this for all the other young women out there who feel the pressure to engage in sexual activities with someone in order to get their attention,” (We Shatter Silence Story from Toronto, ON).⁸⁰

Social pressure for women to engage in sex leads to coercive situations, in which men feel that they are entitled to sex, and women are expected to provide men with access to their bodies. This is one of the many dangerous outcomes of women’s internalization of sexual inequality.

Social sexual coercion complicates discussions of sexual assault in that consent may be stated even when sex is not wanted. Sexual assault prevention training reinforces that a verbal yes is the only way to consent to sex.⁸¹ However, women may say yes to sex, and hand over access to their bodies even though they are not interested in sex. In a qualitative study on

⁸⁰ Tilton, Amy. “We Shatter Silence Story from Toronto.” Take Back the Night | End Sexual & Domestic Violence | Get Help! Take Back the Night, November 14, 2019. <https://takebackthenight.org/we-shatter-silence-story-from-toronto/>.

⁸¹ Flannery, Mary Ellen. “Affirmative Consent: 'Yes Means Yes' in Sex on Campus.” NEA. Accessed December 12, 2021. <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/affirmative-consent-yes-means-yes-sex-campus>.

women's negotiations of oral and anal sex, one woman revealed that she felt obligated to participate in unwanted sexual behaviors to please men that she was with:

“When I was younger I was more about pleasing the other person so even though I never really wanted anal, when the guy showed that he wanted it, I just said ‘Okay.’ I never really liked it and felt a little painful and then just very uncomfortable. But that’s just what you do for guys you’re with,” (36 years of age, white, heterosexual woman).⁸²

In this quote, the woman expresses that her pain and discomfort are insignificant compared to a man's enjoyment. Women put up with discomfort and pain to be “good” sexual partners. Therefore, “The assumption that consent is given freely and willingly” in sexual engagements ignores the pressure for women to have sex to meet societal expectations of women in intimate relationships and to avoid negative consequences from refusal.⁸³ This complicates how society understands consent.⁸⁴ Women have difficulty saying no to sex, not because of individual passiveness, but to avoid cultural repercussions. And so, we do not know how often women genuinely consent to sex and have full agency over their sexual engagements.

However, by engaging in unwanted sexual acts, women are reaffirming to men that their bodies can be conquered for men's sexual pleasure. Internalization of sexual inequality leads women to behave in accordance with the principle that women should prioritize men's sexual desires over their own desires and comfort. Social sexual coercion is a detrimental consequence

⁸² Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁸³ Conroy, Nicole E., Ambika Krishnakumar, and Janel M. Leone. “Reexamining Issues of Conceptualization and Willing Consent: The Hidden Role of Coercion in Experiences of Sexual Acquiescence.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30, no. 11 (July 2015): 1828–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514549050>.

⁸⁴ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 217–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

of women's internalization of sexual inequality. Societal pressure for women to engage in sex perpetuates sexual inequality in that men experience women as desiring sex more often than they do, reaffirming the message from pornography that women are hypersexual beings.

Women are not to blame for the internalization of sexual inequality. Gendered socialization through pop culture and pornography promotes the objectification of women and devaluation of women's pleasure. Resultantly, women encounter issues including the stigma against women's vulvas and social sexual coercion that cause women further harm and maintain sexual inequality.

We need sexual equity.

Sexual inequality is a severe problem. However, due to the private nature of sex, sexual inequality is often presented as an issue of personal choices rather than as a community problem. Creating a standard for sexual equity is a precarious process because some people do not need or desire the same sexual attention or activities as others. Diagnosing individuals with unhealthy sex lives poses the danger of falsely sexualizing all women into one universal group that highly values sex, despite the many different outlooks of women due to race, sexuality, disability status, and lived experience. For instance, some asexual women may be happy to sexually provide for male partners without desiring reciprocity; some women have kinks (less common sexual preferences) that involve abstaining from orgasm or opting into sexual subordination,⁸⁵ and many HS women simply desire sex less frequently than their male partners.⁸⁶ There are instances where reciprocity of sexual pleasure is not needed.

⁸⁵ Pohtinen, Johanna. "From Secrecy to Pride Negotiating the Kink Identity, Normativity, and Stigma." *ETNOLOGIA FENNICA* 46 (2019): 84–108. <https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.v%vi%i.74306>.

⁸⁶ Nagoski, Emily. *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021.

However, there's a universality of sexual inequality as seen through the focus on vaginal intercourse in the HS sex script, the limited colloquial definition of sex, the pleasure gap, and the comparatively low frequency of cunnilingus which ultimately combine to objectify women's bodies as sources of pleasure for men. Women and Gender Studies professor, Breanne Fahs, explains that individual differences do not falsify the universality of sexual inequality. She writes that:

“...the absence of reciprocity is not itself problematic. Some people may not inherently enjoy giving or receiving oral sex, and some may even want their partners to make sexual decisions; still, women's narratives about reciprocity as combined with the other themes around sexual coercion, performance, and entitlement reveal that sexual negotiation is immensely complicated and laced with cultural ‘baggage’ around women's ability to have voice or express their needs.”⁸⁷

Sexual inequality extends beyond personal relationship problems. There is a widespread cultural devaluation of women's sexual pleasure and this coincides with men's sexual entitlement.

Equitable sex needs to be a priority in individual HS relationships. Sexual inequality limits women's agency, and it harms men too by imposing rigid standards of toxic masculinity. In the HS sex script, men are expected to lack emotions, to be dominant over women, and to be phallus centered.⁸⁸ Men's social worth is based on their ability to have sex with many women.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex.” *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 229. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁸⁸ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 128.

⁸⁹ Khan, Sharful Islam, Nancy Hudson-Rodd, Sherry Sagers, Mahbubul Islam Bhuiyan, Abbas Bhuiya, Syed Afzalul Karim, and Oratai Rauyajin. “Phallus, Performance and Power: Crisis of Masculinity.” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 23, no. 1 (2008): 37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681990701790635>.

By practicing sexual equity, men will not have to conform to one hyper-masculine type of man, and may instead have more emotionally fulfilling lives, for the betterment of society.⁹⁰ Also, when women are having more pleasurable sex, their passion is greater, and men have more pleasurable sex in return.⁹¹ There is no loser in the battle for sexual equity, but right now there is hardly a battle at all. We need to practice equitable sex.

Equitable sex must target the specific failings of sexual inequality by prioritizing equal pleasure for each person. Equitable sex requires the equal value of women's and men's genitals, specifically the erogenous equivalents, the clitoris, and the penis.⁹² This will minimize the pleasure gap because clitoral stimulation is correlated with women's orgasms.⁹³ Equal prioritization of pleasure humanizes women in that sexual experiences become mutually enjoyable rather than one-sided. Sexual health author Laurie Mintz notes that female same-sex couples have more orgasms because of the focus on clitoral stimulation,⁹⁴ Female same-sex sexual equality suggests that equal prioritization of pleasure will be effective in HS sex as well.⁹⁵

Sexual inequality is largely about the pressure for women to have sex or engage in specific sexual acts when they do not find any pleasure in the act. Women are the primary givers in HS sex. This needs to change. Women should be encouraged to only act as sexual givers when

⁹⁰ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Marital Slavery and Friendship: John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women." Essay. In *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, 177. Philadelphia, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

⁹¹ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018.

⁹² Nagoski, Emily. *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021.

⁹³ Wood, Jessica R, Alexander McKay, Tina Komarnicky, and Robin R Milhausen. "Was It Good for You Too?: An Analysis of Gender Differences in Oral Sex Practices and Pleasure Ratings among Heterosexual Canadian University Students." *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 1 (2016): 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.251-a2>.

⁹⁴ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 13.

⁹⁵ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 13.

they have an enthusiastic interest in the sexual act. In recognizing the societal pressure for women to have sex when they are not interested, equitable sex requires enthusiastic consent to be encouraged and sought out during each moment of the sexual experience.⁹⁶

Women should be less pressured into giving, and it is equally important that men are more sexual giving to their female partners. This aspect of equitable sex is linked to equal prioritization of men's and women's genitals. In the words of Steven Seidman, social theorist and author, equitable sex is "consensual, reciprocal in its pleasures, caring, and [involves] mutual respect and responsibility."⁹⁷ The characteristic of women as givers can be a positive value, but giving should be a responsibility for men as well, so that each person can give and receive pleasure and foster intimacy.

HS couples have the most egregious sexual inequalities, but as aforementioned, male same-sex couples also take on roles where one partner is the primary receiver of pleasure, and the other is the primary giver of pleasure. Couples of all sexualities should strive to practice sexual equity through equal prioritization of each partner's pleasure. Any skewed dynamics of pleasure are harmful to relationships and deny the full value of each partner.

Our society needs equitable sex. But there are social pressures to abide by the HS sex script.⁹⁸ There are benefits of security and intimacy when people conform to sexist dynamics in

⁹⁶ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

⁹⁷ Seidman, Steven. "Constructing Sex as a Domain of Pleasure and Self-Expression: Sexual Ideology in the Sixties." *Theory, Culture & Society* 6, no. 2 (1989): 295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327689006002006>.

⁹⁸ Gul, Pelin, and Tom R. Kupfer. "Benevolent Sexism and Mate Preferences: Why Do Women Prefer Benevolent Men Despite Recognizing That They Can Be Undermining?" *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218781000>.

interpersonal settings,⁹⁹ and there are risks to demanding equality in these intimate contexts.¹⁰⁰ In order to offset the motivations to engage in sexual inequality, I offer the techniques of honest communication, masturbation, and political self-love.

There is a frequent misconception that you should not have to say what you want in a relationship.¹⁰¹ However this is irrational. Each person, and especially each woman, has unique sexual preferences and even for one person, those preferences differ from experience to experience.¹⁰² The only way to know what a person truly finds pleasurable is to create safe opportunities for the person to honestly communicate their feelings.¹⁰³ To create opportunities for honest self-expression, HS men need to pay extra attention to women's social cues that indicate pleasure or discomfort,¹⁰⁴ and HS women need to stop faking pleasure to please male partners because it just reinforces activities that are not pleasurable.¹⁰⁵

Communication is necessary to invest in the unique experience of each partner. Each person has different and varying emotional and sexual needs. Investing in an individual's unique experience means trying new sexual acts, positions, and settings, to tailor the experience to that specific individual. Research on college students' sex shows that women who try different sex positions, prioritize reciprocity in pleasure, and make conscious decisions about the timing of

⁹⁹ Overall, Nickola C., and Matthew D. Hammond. "How Intimate Relationships Contribute to Gender Inequality: Sexist Attitudes Encourage Women to Trade Off Career Success for Relationship Security." *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2017): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732217745096>.

¹⁰⁰ Lever, Janet, David A. Frederick, and Rosanna Hertz. "Who Pays for Dates? Following Versus Challenging Gender Norms." *SAGE Open*, (October 2015): 13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015613107>.

¹⁰¹ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 154.

¹⁰² Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 10.

¹⁰³ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 154.

¹⁰⁴ Wood, Jill M., Patricia Barthalow Koch, and Phyllis Kernoff Mansfield. "Women's Sexual Desire: A Feminist Critique." *The Journal of Sex Research* 43, no. 3 (2006): 236–44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620255>.

¹⁰⁵ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 165.

sexual acts within a sexual experience receive more cunnilingus and have more pleasurable sexual experiences.¹⁰⁶ Sexual health author Laurie Mintz reveals that there is “an array of easily attainable, yet very powerful, skills and attitudes” that can make women’s orgasms as reliable and frequent as men’s.¹⁰⁷

Communication only goes so far if you do not know what feels good for you. Thus, women need to be encouraged to understand and gain confidence in their bodies. This means discovering your individual preferences through masturbation.

Masturbation is highly useful to learn what you specifically find pleasurable, and in what contexts you can find pleasure. Many women simply do not know what feels good for them.¹⁰⁸ For women to gain a sense of entitlement about sexual pleasure, they need to understand their own sexual responses.¹⁰⁹ Masturbation is a private setting without direct social pressures, in which a person can discover their own body. Masturbation can elevate sexual experiences through an understanding of your own pleasure, and it does not need to be done alone. Self-stimulation is associated with orgasms for women in sex with a partner.¹¹⁰ Women’s confidence in masturbation will therefore decrease the pleasure gap and improve sexual equality.

Finally, women need to take on the task of political self-love. Women are taught that vulvas are gross and disgusting, however, men view women’s vulvas more positively than

¹⁰⁶ Backstrom, Laura, Elizabeth A. Armstrong, and Jennifer Puentes. “Women's Negotiation of Cunnilingus in College Hookups and Relationships.” *Journal of Sex Research* 49, no. 1 (2012): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2011.585523>.

¹⁰⁷ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 6.

¹⁰⁸ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 158.

¹⁰⁹ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018.

¹¹⁰ Armstrong, Elizabeth, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty. “Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships.” Essay. In *Families as They Really Are*, edited by Barbara J Risman, 362–77. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2010.

women do.¹¹¹ There is a visualization gap for women and men on women's vulvas because while vulvas are invisible in media, HS men can see women's vulvas through sexual acts like cunnilingus much more closely than women can see their own vulvas. Men's neutrality towards women's vulvas shows that the stigma against women's vulvas is irrationally founded and that women can learn to love their vulvas. Sex is more pleasurable when there is confidence in your own body and comfort with your partner experiencing your body.¹¹² I have always struggled with loving my vulva, but there was a turning point for me when I realized that my disgust for my vulva was rooted in society's shaming of women's genitals in general. I realized that as a feminist, I had to uplift my view of myself, to uplift my tainted view of all women. How could I expect society to achieve sexual equity when I was stuck in society's construction of women as less worthy of sexual pleasure? And so, I urge us all to take on the task of practicing sexual equity in your own relationships.

Sex Education on Sexual Equity

Achieving sexual equality requires each person to intentionally treat genders equitably. Therefore, the United States needs to spark a cultural shift. To do this, we need comprehensive sex education to inform youth of the problem, and to provide next generations with the skills to foster equitable sex. There is a lack of policy on sexual health beyond the prevention of disease. We live in a society that prioritizes the body rather than the person whom the body belongs to,¹¹³

¹¹¹ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. "Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations around Oral and Anal Sex." *Sexuality & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 218. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09766-w>.

¹¹² Nagoski, Emily. *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021.

¹¹³ Walker, Elizabeth Reisinger, Janet R. Cummings, Jason M. Hockenberry, and Benjamin G. Druss. "Insurance Status, Use of Mental Health Services, and Unmet Need for Mental Health Care in the United States." *Psychiatric Services* 66, no. 6 (March 1, 2015): 578–84. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201400248>.

and this is exacerbated for sexual health.¹¹⁴ Sex education curriculum should include and expand on the popular topics of anatomy,¹¹⁵ contraception and diseases,¹¹⁶ and introduce sexual diversity, sex positivity, and communication as fundamental aspects of sexual health.

Sex positivity does not mean that the dangers of sex are hidden from students. Proper lessons on the dangers of sex inform students about the risks of sexual engagements and evaluate alternatives. Sex-positive education includes teaching adolescents the benefits of sex,¹¹⁷ like the benefits to physical and mental health.¹¹⁸ Sex education must teach sex as a spectrum of many different types of pleasure, including manual, oral, anal, and vaginal sex, following the feminist definition of sex. Discussions of sexuality should also include masturbation as a valid type of sex.¹¹⁹

Adolescents need to learn how to advocate for their own sexual enjoyment. Learning how to communicate about sex is a fundamental yet missing aspect of sex education.¹²⁰ Healthy

¹¹⁴ Khan, Sharful Islam, Nancy Hudson-Rodd, Sherry Saggars, Mahbulul Islam Bhuiyan, Abbas Bhuiya, Syed Afzalul Karim, and Oratai Raayajin. "Phallus, Performance and Power: Crisis of Masculinity." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 23, no. 1 (2008): 37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681990701790635>.

¹¹⁵ Lamb, Sharon, and Renee Randazzo. "An Examination of the Effectiveness of a Sexual Ethics Curriculum." *Journal of Moral Education* 45, no. 1 (2016): 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2016.1156520>.

¹¹⁶ Leung, Hildie, Daniel Shek, Edvina Leung, and Esther Shek. "Development of Contextually-Relevant Sexuality Education: Lessons from a Comprehensive Review of Adolescent Sexuality Education across Cultures." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 4 (2019): 621. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16040621>.

¹¹⁷ deFur, Kirsten M. "Getting to the Good Stuff: Adopting a Pleasure Framework for Sexuality Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 2 (2012): 146–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2012.680864>.

¹¹⁸ Meltzer, Andrea L., Anastasia Makhanova, Lindsey L. Hicks, Juliana E. French, James K. McNulty, and Thomas N. Bradbury. "Quantifying the Sexual Afterglow: The Lingering Benefits of Sex and Their Implications for Pair-Bonded Relationships." *Psychological Science* 28, no. 5 (2017): 587–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617691361>.

¹¹⁹ deFur, Kirsten M. "Getting to the Good Stuff: Adopting a Pleasure Framework for Sexuality Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 2 (2012): 146–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2012.680864>.

¹²⁰ Mintz, Laurie B., and Kelsi E. Quicksall. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- and How to Get It*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2018: 10.

communication results in safe, consensual, pleasurable sex.¹²¹ Additionally, sex education gets people talking about sex and makes interpersonal communication about sex more natural.

Though there is major opposition to comprehensive sex education in the United States, seen through the support for Abstinence-Only Until Marriage programs,¹²² depoliticization of sex education is necessary to promote women’s sexual equality.¹²³ Not only is it necessary, but it is possible. Sweden teaches comprehensive sex education programs¹²⁴ and in the United States, San Francisco Unified School District¹²⁵ and the state of Vermont teach comprehensive sex education.¹²⁶ The California Healthy Youth Act is pushing the state of California in the right direction as well.¹²⁷

Individuals play a crucial role in dismantling sexual inequality. With more people practicing sexual equity, the HS sex script will slowly shift into one that includes and eventually values women’s pleasure. However, the best way to encourage sexual equity is through education on the matter. Thus, the federal government must act with us to create the widespread cultural transformation we need.

Conclusion

¹²¹ deFur, Kirsten M. “Getting to the Good Stuff: Adopting a Pleasure Framework for Sexuality Education.” *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 2 (2012): 146–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2012.680864>.

¹²² Stidham Hall, Kelli. “The State of Sex Education in the United States.” *The Journal of adolescent health: official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 58, no. 6 (2016): 595–97. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.032>.

¹²³ Wood, Jill M., Patricia Barthalow Koch, and Phyllis Kernoff Mansfield. “Women’s Sexual Desire: A Feminist Critique.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 43, no. 3 (2006): 236–44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20620255>.

¹²⁴ “Swedish System of Sexuality Education.” RFSU, November 30, 2017. <https://www.rfsu.se/om-rfsu/om-oss/in-english/national-work/sexuality-education/about-swedish-sexuality-education/>.

¹²⁵ “Health Education.” SFUSD. Accessed November 17, 2021. <https://www.sfusd.edu/health-education>.

¹²⁶ “Sexual Health.” Vermont Official State Website. State of Vermont: Agency of Education. Accessed December 8, 2021. <https://education.vermont.gov/student-support/healthy-and-safe-schools/sexual-health>.

¹²⁷ “Comprehensive Sexual Health & HIV/AIDS Instruction.” California Department of Education, 2016. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/se/>.

Sexual inequality is marked by the HS sex script, the limited colloquial definition of sex and the pleasure gap, and the comparatively low frequency of cunnilingus. Collectively these factors combine to show a cultural devaluation of women's sexual pleasure that coincides with men's sexual entitlement. Prioritization of men's sexual pleasure is ultimately objectification of women's bodies, in that men gain pleasure from access to women's bodies that is not met with affectional reciprocal pleasure. Sexual inequality pervades women's lives in a multitude of contexts, including women's internalization of the stigma against vulvas and social sexual coercion. These consequences ultimately perpetuate sexual inequality. We can evade sexual inequality by committing to sexual equity in our individual relationships through equal prioritization of each person's pleasure. Though societal pressures deter individuals from practicing sexual equity, honest communication, masturbation, and political self-love can promote the feasibility of sexual equity. To encourage sexual equity, the federal government must step in to educate adolescents on comprehensive sex education, that teaches sexual diversity, sex positivity, and communication. Only then can we achieve sexual equality.

Limitations & Directions for Further Research

This paper specifically examines HS sexual inequality in urban U.S. settings in the 21st century. Data on this topic primarily examines young, white, straight cis-women. Sociological research should intentionally expand the data on queer sexual inequality by asking questions like 1) *how does same-sex sex compare to HS sex in terms of sexual equity?* and 2) *how do asexual people manage pleasure dynamics within romantic relationships?* Sociological research should also examine sexual pleasure across cultures by asking: 1) *how does culture play into sexual inequality in cultures where vaginal intercourse is considered sacred?* 2) *how does female*

genital mutilation impact how women negotiate sexual equity? and 3) *Since other cultures, specifically in South Africa and other African countries, have historically valued women's sexual pleasure, what lessons can the United States apply from these cultures? How has colonialism shaped sexual equity in these cultures over time?* In addition to expanding the scope of the data, there are more questions on sexual inequality to be examined in any context. Research should examine *how do men react to women who demand sexual equity in their sexual experiences?* and *how does sexual inequality differ across age groups?* Answering these questions would lead to a more holistic understanding of sexual inequality. By investigating these gaps in current data, more people can be alleviated from sexual inequality and gain autonomy over their full sexual selves.