

Some notes on the female orgasm in 2015

December 16 2015, by Annamarie Jagose



The alleged sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual couple is not actually new.
Credit: Teymur Madjderey

Without the perennially interesting problem of the female orgasm, it sometimes seems that the oddly sex-segregated world of men's and women's magazines would run out of content.

In 2015, for instance, Men's Health ran a number of articles advising men on female [orgasm](#), including: [Ten Lessons about the Female Orgasm: Give Her the Big Finish She Deserves](#), [Give Her an Orgasm in Fifteen Minutes: Bring your Lady to the Boil Quicker Than a Pan of](#)

[Pasta](#) and [Four Sexy Ways to Speed up Her Orgasm: You Want to Leave Her Satisfied but You Don't Have All Night](#).

Meanwhile, across the same year, Cosmopolitan offered equally expansive advice in a range of articles such as [Eight Reasons You're Not Orgasming](#), [Ten Things Guys Don't Understand about the Female Orgasm](#) and [Eight Genius Ways to Orgasm Together](#).

When Cosmopolitan published the results of its [2015 sex survey](#) of more than 2,000 women aged between 18 and 40, it emphasised what it described as the "orgasm gap," the decreased likelihood of a woman rather than a man having an orgasm during heterosexual sex.

The survey's findings – that only 57% of women reliably have orgasms during partnered sex compared to the 95% strike rate of their partners or that 67% of women have faked orgasm usually in order to bring sex to an end without hurting their partner's feelings – were widely reported around the world in a range of media outlets from [The Guardian](#) to the [Huffington Post](#).

While the revelation of the orgasm gap is frequently met with renewed calls for "[orgasm equality](#)," this is less a solution, I would argue, than a resubscription to the very coordinates that frame female orgasm as a problem in the first place.

The erotic scene that emerges from this mediascape is one in which orgasm is gender-stratified as either male or female. Men's orgasms tend to be innate, instinctive and relatively unmediated while women's are acquired with difficulty, unpredictable and the effect of a complex balance of biological, psychological, environmental and social components.

The radical non-synchronicity of women's and men's sexual responses

makes heterosexual sex problematic and, whether erotically heroic or incompetent, [men](#) are the most significant social actors in securing female orgasms.

It would be easy to feel superior to the intended readerships of such magazines and media story cycles but, in my experience, when feelings of superiority come easy it is worth thinking again and differently about the issue.

For a start, it is important to remember that, despite its apparent topicality, the news of the alleged sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual couple is not actually new. As long ago as 1918, Marie Stopes, the author of the most [widely](#)circulated marriage manual in the first half of the 20th century, regretfully noted that:

it is, perhaps, hardly an exaggeration to say that 70 or 80% of our married women (in the middle classes) are deprived of the full orgasm.

And by 1947, Helena Wright, the British medical doctor and contraceptive pioneer, had so lost confidence in the conjugal orgasm [for which she had earlier been an enthusiastic spruiker](#) that [she confessed she had begun](#) "to doubt the efficacy of the penis-vagina combination for producing orgasms in the woman".

As Elizabeth A. Lloyd has noted, [32 quantitative surveys of sexual practice](#) conducted between 1921 and 1995 consistently found that women tend not to have orgasms during penile-vaginal sex.

So rather than being part of the endless dissemination of this fact, whether in the masculinised mode of the statistic or the feminised form of complaint, a more interesting response to surveys like that undertaken by Cosmopolitan would be to ask instead what we can learn from the way that something widely known for a long period of time keeps

circulating as news.

In my recent book, [Orgasmology](#) (2013), I've suggested that the answer lies in the historical conditions under which heterosexuality emerged in the late 19th century as a distinctive form of heteroeroticism, a principally erotic rather than conjugal relation newly characterised by equality and reciprocity.

Women's orgasms, which many 19th-century medical experts wrote off not only as unnecessary but likely impossible, now carried a new burden of significance.

They testified to the mutual satisfactions of heterosexuality often figured in terms of its signature sex act, penile-vaginal intercourse or PVI, to give it the unbeguiling acronym it takes in more recent sexological literature.

Thus not just female orgasms but female orgasms simultaneously achieved with male orgasms in coitus were advocated as an erotic norm by numerous marriage manuals addressed to middle-class readers in the early twentieth century.

By the mid-20th century, however, the ideological claim to erotic relations of parity publicly rehearsed around the heterosexual couple had stalled out against another ideological formation, the sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual pair.

As modern sexual subjects, we still live under the constraining pressure of this contradictory cultural legacy. That is why the apparent revelation that heterosexuality is in trouble never fails to arrive freshly as the diagnosis of a particularly contemporary crisis.

However cannily got up as a sound bite, the fate of such information –

35% of women don't orgasm during sex because they don't get the right kind of clitoral stimulation from their partner; 39% of women mostly orgasm via masturbation – is to be repeated again and again without ever loosening the cultural imagination's allegiance to heterosexual intercourse and its figuration of the sexual reciprocity that is the ethical model for modern heterosexuality.

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Citation: Some notes on the female orgasm in 2015 (2015, December 16) retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-12-female-orgasm.html>

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