

Selling Sex, Sexual Subjectivity, and the Orgasm Gap

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The Orgasm Gap

The most recent representative national survey of sexuality (Laumann et al., 1994) reported that, while 75 percent of heterosexual men reported having orgasms from partnered sex on a regular basis, only about 29 percent of women reported the same (see also Kinsey, 1958).

- This is a robust finding:
 - In Shere Hite report (1981), 26% of 3,000 women experienced orgasm regularly during vaginal intercourse, without other sources of stimulation.
 - A more recent poll done by *Glamour* magazine in October 2000 with 1,500 women indicated that 28% of women achieved an orgasm from intercourse alone.
 - Recent research on college students finds a similar gap.
 - I keep an eye on this data and surveys typically show that women regularly experience orgasm with their male partners between 25 and 30 percent of the time, depending on how they ask the question.
- I would like to suggest that, if our society valued female orgasm, women would experience orgasms at a high rate *regardless of any biological predisposition or problem*.
- I'm to talk about women who have sex with men, mostly because women who have sex with women don't have this problem.
 - Women who have sex with women report higher rates of orgasm. For example, one study found that these women report orgasms about 83% of the time [Douglass & Douglass, 1997; see also Thompson, 1989].)
 - And women who masturbate take, on average, about four minutes to reach orgasm. This is the same for men during intercourse.
- I will argue that a devaluation of female sexual pleasure generally, and orgasm specifically, by both women and men, contributes to the orgasm gap.
- This will include:
 - A discussion of the way in which we gender sexuality in a way that affirms sexual subjectivity for men, but not women.
 - A discussion of how men's sexual subjectivity is further affirmed by sex education in school, mass media, and pornography. And how those sources, conversely, position women as the object of men's desires.
 - I will show how this gendered subjectivity/objectivity binary contributes to how we think about sex itself and how that translates into less sexual pleasure for women.

- And, finally, I will review some of my own research that tries to tease out whether rates of orgasm for women is due to ignorance about women's bodies or an inability to put knowledge into use.

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Gendered Heterosexuality: Male Sexual Subjectivity and the Female Sexual Object

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Sex Education: Learning to be a Male Sexual Subject

Men and women grow up in the U.S. learning very different relationships to their sexuality.

- This begins early and is part of their formal as well as their informal sex education.

Lessons on masculine and feminine sexuality are part of school sex education curricula.

- Boys' sexuality is generally overtly linked with pleasure, for example, the insistence of the male sex drive, wet dreams, and orgasm in the context of reproduction (Vance, 1989).
 - When we teach children about reproduction, male ejaculation and so, necessarily, male orgasm is a central part of the lesson.
 - Wet dreams and unintended erections, often discussed in school, are direct evidence that men's bodies are sexual.
 - And men are often taught about the fact that they will have sexual feelings and, perhaps, need to control or channel them.
- Conversely, sex education for girls tends to ignore any pleasurable aspects of sex, and instead focuses on the of pregnancy, abandonment, STDs, ruined reputations, and rape (Beyer & Ogletree, 1996; Holland et al., 1998; Levine, 2002 Beyer; Fine, 1988).
 - Talking about reproduction doesn't facilitate a discussion of orgasm for girls, as it does for boys.
 - It does, however, facilitate a discussion of how sex can get girls "into trouble."
 - Studies show that teenage girls are more likely than boys to associate sexual desire with violence, disease, pregnancy, and the risk of being labeled a "tease" or a "slut."
 - Girls *are* taught that boys have a sexual drive... and that they should fear it or, at least, be prepared to manage it.
- So female orgasm, female sexual pleasure more generally, and even the possibility that women may want to have sex, are not topics in most sex education classrooms.

- Studies show, too, that parents at home often do not discuss the location, function, existence of the clitoris (Kreinin, 2002; Ogletree&Ginsburg, 2000) or pleasurable aspects of sex (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Tolman, 1994).
- And in other authoritative sources like dictionaries, anatomy texts, and gynecology texts, the vagina is often presented as the primary site of female sexual pleasure and the clitoris is ignored or presented in greater brevity than the vagina or the penis.

The lesson then, that sex education delivers and other authoritative sources back up, is that men are sexual subjects.

- In this context, a subject is a person who thinks, feels, perceives, intends, etc.,
- In contrast to the objects of thought.

Subject: A person who thinks, feels, perceives, intends, etc..
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That is, they learn that they have sexual subjectivity: desires, drives, feelings, wants. That men are sexual is a lesson that we all learn early on.

- Women do not get the same lessons about their own sexual subjectivity. They learn to worry about sex and to plan to control boys' advances.

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The Mass Media and Women's Sexual Objectification

The mass media also encourages men to think of themselves as sexual beings with desires.

Conversely, it further encourages women to think of themselves as the *object* of men's *subjective* desires.

- For example, we hear that "sex sells." But *whose* sex is sold? And to who?
- If it was simply that sex sold, we'd see men and women equally sexually objectified in popular culture. Instead, we see, primarily, women sold to (presumably heterosexual) men. So what are we selling, exactly, if not "sex"?
- We're selling men's sexual subjectivity and women as a sex object. That is, the idea that men's desires are centrally important and meaningful, and women's are not (because women are the object to men's subjectivity).
- Objectification is the stripping of a person or group of people of their consciousness.

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- When we regard a group of people as objects, we act as if they have no feelings, no desires of their own. They are things to be consumed, used, or owned.
- So sexual objectification occurs when a person's body is treated as an object that exists for the pleasure and use of others.
- We see a gendered subjectivity/object binary everywhere in the mass media:
 - For example, if this ad was selling Tango with sex, they'd both end up naked in the fourth frame, no?

Candy:

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- There is only one female m&m, the green M&M. So male M&Ms come in multiple colors, flavors, shapes, and personalities, but female M&Ms are just sex objects.

Travel

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Vegetarianism:

[SLIDE]

Sea Monkeys (wink):

[SLIDE]

Organ Donation

Text: “Becoming a donor is probably your only chance to get inside her.”

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That women’s object status and men’s subjectivity is sold to women in women’s magazines (for example, Cosmo and Glamour always feature scantily clad women on the cover) in no way undermines the idea that men’s sexual subjectivity is being sold. It’s just that it’s being sold to *all of us*.

Let’s look a little closer at this subjectivity/objectivity binary.

[FOUR SLIDES]

Masculine	vs.	Feminine
subject	vs.	object
to desire	vs.	to be desired
to be attracted	vs.	to be attractive
pursue	vs.	pursued
predator	vs.	prey
“I want.”	vs.	“I want to be wanted.”

Here are some examples:

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- For men, doing masculine heterosexuality means being actively sexual.
 - Young men talk about sex often (locker room talk). But they talk about feeling attracted and acting on attraction. And their talk centers around women as the *object* of their attraction (“I’d hit that”).
- Femininity means, in part, being that object. What is emphasized for women is sexual *attractiveness* to men.

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- Instead of talking about who they’d like to “do,” women talk about their bodies, their clothes, their ability to attract male attention... essentially, women talk about who they want to want them.
- In the game of sexuality, then, men are the players. Women are not the players, they are the toys:

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- Another piece of evidence for women’s object status and men’s sexual subjectivity is how heterosexual couples are matched up in the mass media. Do you notice how often average-looking, even pretty dumpy guys are matched up with gorgeous, thin women?

King of Queens:

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The Simpsons

[SLIDE]

This phenomenon illustrates the object/subject binary because...

- it reveals that her subject status (her desire) doesn’t matter... and his object status (how sexy he is) doesn’t matter.
- That is why he can be dumpy (because her attraction to him is irrelevant) and she must be beautiful (because his own sense of his own attractiveness is irrelevant compared to his desire).

**Consequently, women’s sexuality is equated with the ability to deliver a sexy body:
...these women are sexy like a Porsche is sexy...**

- nip/tuck

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- And a Porsche might be sexy, but it's not sexual... it can't have urges or respond sexually...
- ...insofar as we lump sexy women in with sexy things, women's sexual subjectivity is denied.
- This is what *Playboy* looks like these days:
 - Notice they don't have holes... etc

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- Women who self-objectify—that is, women who internalize the idea that they are first and foremost objects for other people's visual and tactile pleasure—are more likely to habitually monitor their bodies, and situations of nudity are cause for anxiety which can limit sexual activities and pleasure.
 - Women who are preoccupied with how their bodies look in sexual positions are less engaged in the activity than they could be, and are probably less comfortable with more “revealing” sexual positions.
 - This is related to the classic idea of “spectatoring” or constantly imagining how you look and sound as you are engaged in sexual activity.

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Pornography and the Performance of Sexual Pleasure

- Rise of the internet and of personal computers have made pornography easier to access than ever before.
- Porn has become normative and normal.
- Porn is also a 10 billion dollar industry in the U.S. (Jensen).
 - It is estimated that 75% of all money spent online is for porn of some type (Jensen)
- As porn has multiplied and become more accessible, there has been a sort of pornographic arms race where porn producers have had to get more and more “extreme” to get viewers.
 - This has led to increasingly violent pornography (xx & Kimmel): for example, gagging and bleeding are sexualized now.
 - It's also led to the inclusion of more and more demanding sexual activities
 - Fellatio, anal sex, and double and triple penetration are now par for the course in mainstream pornography (Jensen).

- Double and triple penetration are when a woman is penetrated in different orifices by two or three penises.
- We are now started to see porn with quadruple penetrations which involves, simultaneously, a penis in a woman's mouth, anus, and two in her vagina.
- None of these practices are likely to result in orgasm for most women.
- So pornography increasingly decenters women's pleasure in favor of men's pleasure.
- For men, the cum shot, or the common practice of showing male ejaculation, affirms male orgasm, one measure of pleasure, as central.
- So some men are learning how to sex and what to expect from women from porn and when these men start having sex with women they may be understandably surprised when women don't react this way.
- But about ¼ of people who visit pornographic websites are women and 50% of college-aged women say that pornography is an acceptable way to express sexuality.
- So porn is an activity that many women participate in or endorse.
- And what's really insidious about this, past the violence and the representation primarily of activities that don't likely result in orgasm for women, is the modeling that women receive when they consume porn.
- A female porn star's *job* is to fake sexual ecstasy while doing things that typically do not stimulate the clitoris (Levy).
- So women watch other women *fake* sexual arousal and response and then think that that's what *real* sex is or should be like.
- Then, of course, they too are likely disappointed or confused when they get into sexual relationships.

So, all of these sources—sex education, the mass media, and pornography—affirm men's sexual subjectivity and women's sexual objectivity: women are for men's pleasure.

The Social Construction of Sex and the "Coital Imperative"

The centering of male pleasure, the penis, and his ejaculation is so strong that we literally define sex as what predictably results in an orgasm for men. The word "sex" is largely conflated with penile-vaginal intercourse. Notice:

- Whether or two people have had sex is ambiguous if penile-vaginal intercourse did not occur, but not at all ambiguous if it did.
- Virginity loss is conflated with penile-vaginal intercourse. Many of my students will say that they are virgins and also that they've given 12 guys blowjobs. Some students deliberately try to preserve their virginity by giving fellatio or even participating in anal sex.
- The flip side to the definition of sex as penile-vaginal intercourse is the "coital imperative."
 - A rule that "makes it unthinkable that mature heterosexuals could have sex without having intercourse."

- So, for heterosexual couples, penile-vaginal intercourse is essentially compulsory... and it's no accident that this behavior reliably produces orgasm in men, but not women.
- **And**, once he has an orgasm, sex is... um... over. His orgasm delimits the boundaries of sexual activity, her orgasm is rather irrelevant not just to whether sex was good or something... but literally to whether sex has happened. We cannot say the same for him.

So the definition of sex as penile-vaginal intercourse and resistance to changing this idea accounts for a lot of myths about female sexual pleasure that are out there.

- We, as a society, are trying really damn hard to get women's bodies to conform to a phallogentric model of sex. That is, we spend a lot of time wondering what is wrong with women, instead of wondering what is wrong with the sex we're having.
- Most notably, of course, is the idea of the "vaginal orgasm."

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- This is a guy saying, "Huh, penile-vaginal intercourse always works for me? What's wrong with you?"
- There are two things that are typically meant by the term:
 - the idea that there is a spot, a orgasm button, in the vagina equivalent to the clitoris. We know this mostly as the g-spot.
 - the other "vaginal orgasm" is the idea that women have clitoral orgasms that are triggered by vaginal intercourse.
 - Let's talk about each.

First, the g-spot:

- So, first, it's important not to reject women's experiences of their own bodies. Some women do report that they experience something pleasurable related to a spot in their vagina.
- The studies either find nothing there or they find *something* there in *some* women.
- And here's my theory about the g-spot:
 - Much of men's and women's especially external genitalia come from the same fetal tissue.

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- There's a reason why the clitoris and the penis are orgasmic organs, they come from the same fetal tissue.
- For this same reason, we wouldn't expect women to have two orgasmic buttons and men only to have one. That's like thinking it makes sense for women to have three eyeballs and men two.
- THAT SAID... it appears that the g-spot is where the Skene's glands are found in women and the Skene's glands are homologous to the prostate gland in men.

[SLIDE OF EACH]

- Well, what do we know about the prostate gland:
 - it makes a good portion of semen... so we shouldn't be that surprised, then, if women report ejaculation from stimulation of the g-spot. And they do. Some studies confirm this and find that the fluid is distinct from urine.
 - We also know that men find stimulation of the prostate pleasurable and this is the primary reason that men enjoy being penetrated anally. And when they are, they often report ejaculation from prostate gland stimulation. So we shouldn't be that surprised that some women find stimulation of their Skene's glands pleasurable, and even have ejaculations.
- Skene's gland have shown to vary very widely in women, maybe explaining why there is so much disagreement as to whether a g spot exists.
- But ejaculation and orgasm are physiologically distinct things. No doubt both bring pleasure, but it's a mistake to call ejaculation orgasm.
- That aside, I'm all for women and men doing whatever brings them pleasure.
- The problem is in the politicization of this issue and the emphasis on women finding their g-spot so that they can have orgasms during penile-vaginal intercourse.
- If the g-spot *reliably* resulted in orgasm, or ejaculation for that matter, in women... we wouldn't have a million Cosmo articles trying desperately to help us find this mysterious spot. Nor would we have cosmetic surgeons offering enhancements of the g-spot with silicone injections.

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- It's existence, in some women, is no reason to search for it or get foreign substances injected into our bodies when there is a perfectly good orgasmic button right there called the clitoris.
- *This obsession with the g-spot says more about our desire to define sex in terms of male pleasure, than it does about our bodies.*
 - For example, we do not see a huge industry built up around trying to help men find their prostate, selling dildos to all the straight boys and their girlfriends, so that they can maximize men's sexual pleasure or be sexually liberated somehow.
- The emphasis on the g-spot is all about shaping women's bodies into a form that fits men's needs.

Okay, the other “vaginal orgasm”... the idea that penile-vaginal intercourse can trigger a clitoral orgasm. A good quarter of women report that this happens for them.

- Okay, so I only have one thing to say about this: why do we call it a “vaginal orgasm”? We have orgasms in our sleep, right? But those orgasms are clitoral orgasms. So we can accept that a clitoral orgasm can result from all kinds of stimulation.

- If a woman has an orgasm because someone is caressing her face, we don't call it a "face orgasm." If she has one because someone is rubbing her thigh, we don't call it a "thigh orgasm." There is no discourse about a "butt orgasm" or an "elbow orgasm."
- So, again, this labeling is political and about a re-visioning of women's bodies through a patriarchal lens that prioritizes men's sexual pleasure.

And when sex isn't pleasurable, women often blame themselves.

- They think their bodies can't do it. I was asked, for example, if it's true that women not physiologically capable of having an orgasm until their 30s.
- They think that they're supposed to have "vaginal orgasms" and there must be something wrong with them if they can't.
- They think, perhaps that women are inherently less sexual.
- OR they think that women's bodies just take too long and that getting an orgasm is a burden on both men and women.
- One author writes that a lot of young people simply decide that:
 - "it's unrealistic to expect a woman to orgasm every time, [so]... it is better not to worry too much about it."

Putting this all together, the lack of commitment to female sexual pleasure (likely by men and women), the social construction of women as sexual objects and the importance of being desired and pleasing men, plus a culture in which pornography is readily accessible as an example of what sex is "supposed" to be like... leads to a lot of faked orgasms.

- 72 percent of women admit to having faked orgasm in their current or most recent relationship... and they're more likely to do it if they're in love with the guy.
- And if you think about faking as a spectrum that includes all that extra moaning and groaning and squirming... and that vague but affirmative answer to the question "Was that good for you?" then the faking epidemic is pretty severe.

- Young women have gotten much better at saying "yes" or "no" to sex, but many are completely at a loss as to how to have any influence over the *shape* of the sexual encounter that they get once they have said "yes" to it.

So let's sum up a little bit:

- Women live in a society where sex carries the threat of STDs, pregnancy, and the "tease" and the "slut" label.
- Women live in a society where sex is dangerous, where many have been raped, sexually assaulted, or fear such things.
- Women live in a society that constantly affirms their object status and denies their sexual subjectivity. If you set aside the moaning of the female porn star, there is a silence around women's sexual pleasure.
- Women live in a society that prioritizes a type of sex that doesn't reliably give them orgasms. And blames them when they don't have them.
- And men! Men live in a society that tells them that what pleases them pleases her and many of these men are having sex with women who pretend like it does.

We shouldn't be surprised that we find that women report fewer orgasms than men.

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Knowledge about the Clitoris and Women's Orgasm

So I kind of see two big factors here:

- a lack of information, ignorance about female orgasm.
- and a cultural devaluation of female orgasm, likely by men and women alike.

So, I did a study that tried to tease out these two factors.

- In surveys with undergrads at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, I asked about rates of orgasm and knowledge about the clitoris.

The orgasm gap was 52 percent: 39 percent of women, compared to 91 percent of men, usually or always experienced orgasm in partnered sex.

- **First, I asked them to just find the clitoris on a diagram:**

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The Percent of Men and Women who were able to Locate the Clitoris on a Diagram of the Vulva and Correctly Answer to Four True/False Questions (657 Women and 226 Men)

Clitoral Knowledge Measures		
	Women	Men
	%	%

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Diagram: "Where exactly on the body is the clitoris located?"

71	75
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- **And then I asked a series of true false questions:**

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Question 1: "The clitoris is on the front wall of the vaginal canal."

39	34
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Question 2: "The clitoris is directly stimulated by (penis-vagina) intercourse."

69	62
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Question 3: “Most women will have an orgasm from (penis-vagina) intercourse.”

75

67

[SLIDE]

Question 4: “The g-spot is another name for the clitoris.”

58

71

[SLIDE]

Clitoral Knowledge Scores: 3.15

3.12

- It is important to remember that women had access to a clitoris their entire lives, and the men in our sample had gained access, if at all, only recently (88% of the men had had sex with a woman). For this reason, it is surprising that women did not know *more* about the clitoris than men.

- 53% of women reported having ever masturbated. So half of women had never accessed their own body as a source of information about the clitoris... this may help explain why men know as much as women.
- Women who reported that they had used self-exploration as a source of information about the clitoris had the highest clitoral knowledge score (compared to women who did not report that source): 3.59.
- And self-exploration predicted knowledge for women better than any other source of knowledge.
- Now, this is crazy, right? I mean, if I were curious about what it felt like to run my fingers through hair, I wouldn't turn to the internet or ask my mom!?
 - These women must be either NOT curious or REALLY afraid.

- So, I'll leave it up to you to decide whether this is a low, high or adequate amount of knowledge.

- Let's look at the relationship between this knowledge and orgasm for women... because the assumption of health education is usually that if we give someone knowledge, they will be able to use it.

- Here is a slide showing the relationship between the frequency of orgasm with masturbation and their knowledge about the clitoris. It shows a really nice positive correlation:

[TABLE]

TABLE 5: Women's Mean Score on the Clitoral Knowledge Measure by Frequency of Orgasm in Masturbation and Partnered Sex

<i>Frequencies of Orgasm</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Frequency of Orgasm in Masturbation (n = 295)			
Never	2.98 (1.74)		51
Sometimes	3.20 (1.60)		40
About ½ the time	.80 (1.23)		10
Usually	3.65 (1.31)		80
Always	3.92 (1.41)		114

$p < .001$ according to bivariate regression.

But check it out:

[TABLE]

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Always	3.92 (1.41)		114
Frequency of Orgasm with a Partner (n = 437)			
Never	3.60 (1.26)		124
Sometimes	3.20 (1.52)		102
About ½ the time	.15 (1.36)		40
Usually	3.34 (1.39)		143
Always	3.60 (1.31)		28

$p < .001$ according to bivariate regression.

Women who always had an orgasm with their partner shared the highest mean score with women who never did.

- If only a few such women were observed they could, perhaps, be explained away as “anorgasmic” women who sought out knowledge about the clitoris specifically because they did not have orgasms with their partners.
 - But this was 28 percent of the sexually active women in the sample.
 - These 124 knowledgeable women who never experienced orgasm with their partners, when compared with other women, were approximately the same age, were as likely to cite any particular source as most important, and experienced orgasm with masturbation at approximately the same rate. They also were not significantly different in likelihood of receiving clitoral stimulation, faking orgasm, extent of their secondary school sex education, and length of relationships (a discussion of these measures is available on request).
 - Not only did they not differ on these measures, when they did significantly differ, it was in the directions expected to *increase* the frequency of experiencing orgasm with a partner. They were significantly more likely to masturbate ($p < .01$)

and more often cited their partner ($p < .05$) and self-exploration ($p < .05$) as important sources of information about the clitoris (but not more likely to have ranked them first).

- This explains their high score on the clitoral knowledge measure and suggests that cultural forces may inhibit the use of their knowledge.
- So, information alone cannot necessarily compensate for a gendered heterosexuality that shapes interpersonal sexual interaction by emphasizing male sexual subjectivity and the objectification of women (Connell, 1987; Rich, 1980; Weeks, 1985).
- An empowerment politics, in which women are taught about their sexual pleasure and how to negotiate it (Holland et al., 1998; Vanwesenbeeck, 1997), assumes that men and women have equal resources and power with which to negotiate (Jackson & Scott, 1997).
- However, in a system of gender inequality, her subordinate position may be less important to the woman than the (sometimes critical) benefits she gains from her relationship to her partner.

In Conclusion

Cultural Contributions to Female Inorgasmia:

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An environment that encourages male sexual subjectivity and the (self-) objectification of women.

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Definition of sex that prioritizes men's pleasure.

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A de-prioritization of women's sexual pleasure in practice, likely by both men and women.

- Or, if either partner simply prioritizes male pleasure or believes the other to do so, the things one must do to attain female orgasm will be deprioritized as well.

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A mythology that affirms this de-prioritization as natural and normal.

- If the orgasm gap is interpreted as biological (Pastor, n.d.), some women may not expect their sexual encounters to be orgasmic, while the rest quickly learn that it is not

and adjust their expectations accordingly (Holland et al., 1998; Levine, 2002; Vanwesenbeeck, 1997).