

Chapter 6. Intimate Combat: Sexuality and Gender Inequality

As a result of sexuality, gender inequality dramatically differs from other forms of inequality such as class or race. Women and men are bound together as intimate couples. And because of reproduction, all people are bound to both mothers and fathers and other kin of both genders. The obligations and expectations that bind spouses (and kin) are difficult to avoid or break. Members of dominant and subordinate groups based on class or race also have direct relations with each other. These include the ties between lord and peasant, between plantation owner and slave, or between factory owner and worker. Still, these lack the peculiar charge and intimacy of sexuality and reproduction. Sex distinguishes women from men and sex inextricably binds them together.

It is difficult to believe that gender relations would have ever been the same if reproduction depended on some completely unemotional exchange, if it involved no arousal in either sex and no physical contact. But this is not the case. Instead, women and men in all societies confront each other in the presence of enormous sexual tension. We therefore must ask what relation exists between sexuality and inequality.

Many theorists agree we must consider sexuality if we wish to explain gender inequality and its consequences. They cannot agree, however, about what matters. One deep rift dividing theorists concerns causal perspectives. Is sexuality a cause or an effect of inequality?

In the 1960s, the emerging modern feminist movement stressed a claim that society restricted women to the role of sexual objects while simultaneously repressing their sexuality. Since then, competing interpretations of sexuality have divided feminist activists and theorists into factions. Some, often called *radical feminists*, believe sexuality is the driving force behind gender inequality. Others believe that inequality has shaped, or deformed, sexuality, but consider this just one more consequence of inequality rather than its central objective.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* focused feminist theory onto sexuality like no other work before it. One major idea motivated *Sexual Politics*: all sex reflected the tension between male dominance and female subordination. This idea was not new news to the scholars concerned with such issues. But Millet departed from previous work by stressing sex's overwhelming importance, proclaiming it with a bluster and wit that inflamed her audience. The intrusion of power

differences¹¹³ into sexuality, she charged, completely contradicted the deceptive ideology that camouflaged the intents and effects of sex.

Unfortunately, Millet couldn't say what was significant about the relationship between power and sexuality. Was it primarily proof of the existence of power differences? Was it further evidence that women lived worse lives than men as a result of inequality? Did it locate the fountainhead of inequality in sexuality, with men's desires to act out sexual aggression toward women the major source of women's subordination? Sexuality was surely an issue, but what exactly was the issue?

False Myths of Differences in Sexuality

Popular cultural beliefs portray women's sexual feelings and behavior as starkly different from men's. Consider these common beliefs about men compared to women. Men, supposedly, have stronger sex drives, they become aroused more easily, and they find it harder to control themselves when aroused. Moreover, men get more enjoyment from sex (because they have more orgasms), they focus their sexual drive more narrowly on intercourse, they feel more sexually possessive, they engage in more extramarital sex, and they have more sex without love. These beliefs paint women in colder, more virtuous tones. Women, supposedly, have less sexual desire and more control, they have more difficulty achieving pleasure, they need more emotional closeness to find sex satisfying, and they have less sex.

By and large, these portraits depict mythical differences.¹¹⁴ Illusions about sexuality pervade our culture. Before we can make sense of sexuality's relationship to inequality, we must unmask these myths.

In truth, women and men share similar sexual desires and sexual experiences during their lives in this society. Many readers will find this hard to believe, because our culture so successfully contends that they are completely different. Yet, recent research on sexuality has shown contemporary women and men differ little. The sexes share remarkably similar biological foundations. Women and men have similar subjective experiences of sexual arousal and similar feelings during orgasm. They become sexual aroused equally often. They have sexual

¹¹³ As Millet somewhat simplistically reduced the relations of inequality between the sexes.

¹¹⁴ The feminist literature has been ambivalent about the myths of differences in sexuality. Sometimes they are rejected as false beliefs, sometimes they are accepted as a true but perverse condition resulting from male dominance, and sometimes they are portrayed as true differences that show women's superior virtue.

fantasies equally often and with similar content. They respond similarly to erotic materials.¹¹⁵

In short, women and men experience sexual desire and arousal in much the same way and to the same degree, despite the distinctive sexuality attributed to them. Still, women's and men's sexuality does differ in important ways related to inequality. But before we try to identify those differences, let's try to dispel the most important and inaccurate myths. These myths concern not only the content of sexuality, but also what causes sexual experience and behavior.

BIOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

People believe that some differences between female and male sexuality grow naturally and inexorably out of biology. No one would contest the emphatic biological differences between women's and men's sexual organs. They define sex distinction, after all. Only men have erections. Only women get pregnant. Only men ejaculate. Do these physiological differences cause or reveal differences in sexuality? Do they consistently influence desire, anxiety, or enjoyment? Several possibilities have received substantial attention. Many have believed that men experience more anxiety over sex because they fear impotence. On the other side, people sometimes attribute more anxiety to women because they are vulnerable to pregnancy. Moreover, our culture has long sustained a popular belief that men get more enjoyment from sex because they achieve orgasm more readily.

Performance Anxiety. Many assume men must suffer performance anxieties unknown to women because men may become impotent. Women, the argument goes, need only open their legs to give men access and pleasure. Therefore women can perform no matter how they feel. Men, however, must be sexually excited to possess an erection adequate for intercourse.

This picture blurs if we look closely. For most young men most of the time, erections are not difficult to achieve (indeed, they sometimes embarrass young men by being difficult to avoid). While impotence (or erectile dysfunction in the popular contemporary phrasing) occurs with increasing frequency as men age, Viagra and similar drugs allow even men with impotence issues to achieve erections most of the time. Indeed, in this society *women* have surely feared men's ready capacity for erection far more than the possibility that a man would prove unable to deliver.

Moreover, if we consider sexuality independent of cultural expectations, erections are not crucial to heterosexual pleasure or success. Women's sexual satisfaction does not depend so much on intercourse as the stimulation of the

¹¹⁵ [e.g. Offir]

clitoris. Men's erections give no biological basis to male anxiety over pleasing women. Nor could it be that men have cause to be more anxious than women about achieving pleasure for themselves. Research has consistently shown men achieve more orgasms than women.

This does not mean that men cannot suffer performance anxiety. If men typically experience performance anxiety, however, the biological differences between the sexes cannot be the cause. Instead, the anxiety must stem from socially constructed sexual expectations. We will return to those later.

Pregnancy Anxiety. Perhaps the picture just needs to be reversed. Some have believed that anxiety may restrain women's sexuality more than men's because women are vulnerable to pregnancy. Certainly, women have had to assume a risk of pregnancy through much of history. And this has undoubtedly constrained their willingness to engage in sex outside of marriage whenever a pregnancy would be socially unacceptable (true in many but not all societies).

This does not apply well to modern societies, however. Methods to prevent (contraception) or remedy (abortion) pregnancy have been technically available for a long time. In a modern society, women may still experience this anxiety, but it is usually situationally specific. Most importantly, before they become sexually active, many young women are both inexperienced and unprepared for their first sexual experiences, so that having sex with a man carries a threat of pregnancy unless the man takes the initiative with contraception.

In general, however, contraception is readily available to women who want it. And abortion is available as a means out of pregnancy if contraception fails (although abortion access is sometimes difficult and abortion is commonly experienced as an emotionally costly strategy). Thus the biological risk of pregnancy has largely been eliminated as a cause of differences in sexuality. The imagery associated with the long running, popular television series *Sex in the City* and similar shows have clearly associated the possibilities of unfettered sexuality with modern womanhood in popular culture.

Orgasmic Pleasure. Some people believe a biological predisposition gives men more sexual satisfaction than women. They note that men achieve orgasm more often than women. Men have to achieve orgasm to engage in reproduction because it is the trigger for ejaculating. Women's part in conception has no similar need for orgasm.

Yet, this argument exaggerates both women's difficulties and men's ease in achieving sexual pleasure. While reproduction does not demand female orgasm as it does male orgasm, physiology does not present any difficulties for female orgasms. The physiological techniques needed to sexually arouse women and give them orgasms are, if anything, simpler for women than men. Research

suggests women have a greater capacity for orgasms than men. Thus, physiology alone cannot explain a possible male orgasmic advantage.

Moreover, we should recognize that a count of orgasms is a limited measure of the quality of sexual experience. Men's ejaculation may ensure some abatement of sexual drive but, by itself, it does not ensure sexual pleasure. If it did, men could simply masturbate and skip sexual contact altogether. Indeed, in most cases both women and men (including homosexuals) can achieve more orgasms by concentrating their sexual efforts on masturbation and ignoring sex with other people. That such a preference is the exception rather than the rule gives strong evidence that orgasms per se are not the chief attraction of sex with other people. It seems implausible, therefore, to infer that men get more pleasure from sex than do women because biology gives men more assured orgasms.

More Alike than Unlike. In short, differences between female and male sexual organs produce no necessary differences in sexual anxiety or sexual pleasure. Certainly, the sexes' roles in biological reproduction differ greatly due to the visible differences between their sexual organs. This leads all too easily to myths that they experience sex differently. Yet, the unseen neurological basis of sexual excitement is remarkably similar for women and men. And, despite contrary cultural expectations, the psychological experience is also much the same in the two sexes. Indeed, given the strong beliefs that women and men have distinctive sexual natures and the socialization of children toward these expectations, the resemblance between the sexes' experience of sexual desire and activity is extraordinary.¹¹⁶

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Nonetheless, much research supports the view that men are more sexually active than women. Recent data imply the differences are declining but still exist. Briefly, the data suggest that men masturbate more, more men have premarital sex, men have more extramarital sex, and more men become homosexual. If true, this implies that, although the sexes experience sexual desire similarly, men satisfy that desire more. These findings have been widely accepted for decades because they conform to cultural beliefs.

Unfortunately, sexual statistics seem to have exaggerated gender differences ever since Kinsey began work on the topic in the 1940s. These data depend on people's willingness to give honest answers about their behavior. But cultural

¹¹⁶ There is extensive variation in the experience of sexuality among women and among men, of course. In saying that women's and men's sexuality resemble each other, we are, to be more precise, arguing that the distribution of psychological experiences of sexuality among women is about the same as the distribution among men.

norms invite men to exaggerate their sexual activity and women to hide theirs. The data on sexual intercourse reveal these shortcomings.

The Logic of Numbers. The statistics showing men have more premarital and extramarital sex have long been indefensible. They imply a logical problem. They say that neither wives nor unmarried women are having as much sex as men. Then, with whom are men having sex?

It is self-evident that the total the number of times all men had heterosexual intercourse must equal the number of times women had intercourse. Every time a man has sex with a woman, a woman has sex with a man. If she is not the man's wife, she must be having either premarital or extramarital sex.¹¹⁷ What happened to the women that gave men their extramarital and premarital sex? If they were not women also having extramarital and premarital sex, who were they? Prostitution could account for some of the discrepancy. Yet, analysts have rarely, if ever, identified men's greater sexual activity solely with commercial sex.¹¹⁸

Thus the simple logic of numbers implies that, outside commercial sex, the total heterosexual activity of males must equal the total for females. This implies that women and men must have similar rates of extramarital and premarital sex.¹¹⁹

Declining Differences or Rising Candor? Recent data on extramarital sex in the United States support this argument. Among couples married less than 10

¹¹⁷The data commonly assume people are either married or have not yet married. They do not treat divorced and widowed people accurately.

¹¹⁸[For an exception see] It is also noteworthy that analysts rarely consider prostitutes' sexual activity as part of women's. It seems that researchers and theorists, of all political orientations, have largely been blinded by the moral distinction between prostitutes and other women. While it is sensible to maintain a distinction between commercial and noncommercial sex, regardless of the political or theoretical value of sometimes recognizing their similarities, female prostitutes, nonetheless, are women who have frequent sex.

¹¹⁹This statement simplifies the problem. A complete analysis must take into account age differentials between women and men having sexual relations and consider the distribution of sexual activity within each sex. Age differentials matter, because, in an expanding population, if men mate with younger women it will result in higher rates of sexuality for men than women in each cohort, the difference in rates depending on the usual age differences and the rate of population growth. This difference would not have any bearing on women's and men's propensities for sex, except in the indirect, and unlikely, possibility that men's greater desire for sex accounts for their mating with younger women. The distribution of sexual activity matters because it is possible that a minority of either sex have high rates of activity while the majority have low rates. While it is necessarily true that the total amount of copulation among men and women must be equal, the participation can be distributed differently for each sex. Prostitution is a special instance, for example, of a minority of women having very high rates of sex.

years, 11% of husbands and 9% of wives admitted having sex with someone other than their spouse in the previous year.¹²⁰ Thus, recently married women and men admit extramarital sex about equally often. This supports the interpretation that a sex difference in the meaning of disclosing sexual activity produced most of the former difference between women and men discovered by researchers. The apparent historical trend toward more similar rates of sexual activity really represents a trend toward increasing honesty. As women become less secretive about their sexual experiences and men feel less need to exaggerate, we see in increasing similarity.

LOVELESS SEX

Another popular belief asserts men have sex without love more often than do women. This also does not hold up well under close inspection. Researchers have given support to this cultural belief. They have found women more often claim that their sexual relations were love affairs.¹²¹

This finding, however, implies conditions that run counter to logic and our empirical knowledge. If men have sex without love more often than do women, then women must more often have sex with men they love but who do not love them in return. This means women must experience or claim love with men more often than men love women. If, on the contrary, men love women as often as women love men, then it is not possible that men have sex without love more than do women.¹²² Neither evidence nor logic sustain the hypothesis that women

¹²⁰Blumstein and Schwartz, p. 276.

¹²¹ Blumstein and Schwartz support this inference with crude data showing that, among people who admit to having had sex with someone other than their spouse or the person with whom they live, a higher proportion of women than men also claimed to have had at least one affair [279, 583 (n. 10)]. Not only are these data crude, however, but if interpreted differently the comparison they cite appears likely to result from men's willingness to admit more extramarital sex than women. For couples married over 10 years, their data show that about the same proportion of both husbands and wives (11%) claim to have had an affair, but a larger proportion of the remaining husbands admit to extramarital sex than do the remaining wives.

¹²²The only way out of this paradox would be for men in love to have sex with more partners than men not in love while the opposite were true for women. This could only happen if women not in love preferred men in love with other women over unattached men for their sex partners.

suffer more unrequited love than do men.¹²³ Research shows women and men love about equally often.¹²⁴

If men do not have more loveless sex than women, why does it appear that they do? The key to this puzzle is the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept *love*. To say, "I am in love" does not state a fact verifiable by clear criteria or other observers. Instead it is a social claim or assessment of one's participation in a relationship. It seems likely that women use the terminology of love for relationships when men would not. Social expectations lead women to tell themselves and others that *love* justifies their sexual activities.

Sex differences in disclosure and justification probably account for the appearance that women require love as a prerequisite to sex. Women probably both exaggerate the frequency of love and deny the frequency of sex while men do the opposite. Both women and men deceive themselves and others to meet cultural expectations.

THE PRIMACY OF INTERCOURSE

Some ideas that have been less important as part of the prevailing ideology have still influenced analysts trying to explain the relationship between sexuality and gender inequality. These include the belief that men emphasize intercourse more and the belief that men are more sexually jealous and possessive than women. If women would not *naturally* chose intercourse as a preferred sexual activity, its prevalence must be due to male dominance. If men were more sexually possessive, their sexual greed might explain the subordination of women.

¹²³ The logic here resembles that used in the discussion above of the rates of sexual activity. To put it concretely, albeit somewhat simplistically, there can be only four kinds of heterosexual couples: those where both the woman and man love the other, those in which only the woman loves, those in which only the man loves, and those in which neither loves. The sexual behavior of couples where the partners share the same feelings, either both or neither love, are entirely *irrelevant* to the hypothesis. For the hypothesis to be true, one of two possibilities must be true about the two groups with divergent feelings. First, those couples with only women in love could outnumber those with only the man in love, and, since the number of men and women in the sexually active years is about equal, this would require that the total number of men in love exceed the number of women in love. Second, while equal in number, those couples with only the woman in love could be more likely to engage in sex than those with only the man in love. If true, this second possibility would imply that women are less concerned with a man's feelings about them than they are about their feelings toward the man when deciding whether to have sex. While logically possible, this is psychologically implausible in this culture.

¹²⁴Rubin, ...

Research by Phillip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz raises serious doubts about these beliefs.¹²⁵

Masters and Johnson's work in the 1960s led some analysts to speculate that women should prefer clitoral stimulation over copulation. The research showed that women achieve their greatest sexual stimulation through their clitorises rather than their vaginas. This prompted speculation that men narrowly focus on intercourse to the exclusion of other sexual activities. With their superior power, men supposedly force women to accommodate their unshared preferences.

Blumstein and Schwartz, on the contrary, found that, in American couples, women's satisfaction with their sex life and their relationship was higher when intercourse is more frequent and a more central part of their sex life. Men's feelings, however, do not depend on the centrality of intercourse¹²⁶. Moreover, their research showed both fellatio and cunnilingus contribute to men's total sexual satisfaction, but neither seems to affect women's satisfaction.¹²⁷ It appears, therefore, that women are at least, and possibly more, motivated to center their sexual lives about intercourse.

SEXUAL JEALOUSY

Another belief in the theoretical literature suggests men wish to control and limit women's sexuality because they are more possessive. Men, it has been suggested, think of women as property. Women supposedly do not conceive of men in the same way. The data on modern American couples does not support this.

Blumstein and Schwartz found that, on the average, women find the thought of their partner having sex with someone else more troubling than did men.¹²⁸ While the data are limited, they correspond to other research findings. Studies of romantic ties show that men have more emotional difficulty with the ending of relationships than do women.¹²⁹ This suggests that the image of men being more sexually possessive rather than romantic is another instance of false ideology.

¹²⁵ *American Couples*.

¹²⁶ Pp. 227-228.

¹²⁷ Pp. 231-237.

¹²⁸ Pp. 253, 581 (n. 12).

¹²⁹ Hill, Charles T.; Rubin, Zick; and Peplau, Lititia Anne. "Breakups Before Marriage: The End of 103 Affairs." *Journal of Social Issues* 32 (1976):147-168.

EQUALLY MISUNDERSTOOD BY ALL

False beliefs about differences between women's and men's sexuality permeate our ideology. People believe the sexes have vastly different feelings about sex and that they follow different patterns of sexual activity. But research and analysis suggest the opposite. Women and men have similar subjective experiences of sex, they become aroused equally often, and biological differences predispose neither sex to more anxiety or to less pleasure. Women and men have similar rates of sexual activity, they like intercourse about the same, they are equally sexually possessive, and they probably have loveless sex equally often.

This does not mean that cultural expectations are unimportant. They are. These illusions about sexuality alert us to the error of confusing cultural expectations with behavior and behavior with biology. Invalid cultural beliefs are theoretically important for two reasons.

First, even an invalid cultural belief can influence behavior. Take, for example, the belief that men are much more likely to have extramarital sex. This affects how people feel about their own desires and their expectations of their spouses.

Second, invalid cultural beliefs are symptoms of real and significant social dilemmas. Inaccurate social beliefs arise and persist only if they fulfill some social purpose. While beliefs can be a response to societal problems shared by all people--e.g., myths to alleviate anxiety about natural disasters in an agricultural society--they are often the result of social inequality.

Inequality always breeds false beliefs that disguise and justify dominance and that ease the pain of subordination. Because sexuality so depends on sexual inequality, we must expect many invalid sexual beliefs to result from that inequality.

The Opposition Between Female and Male Sexuality

The differences between women's and men's sexuality have been constituted as a set of socially constructed oppositions that continuously intensified the tensions between the sexes. As has been discussed, many cultural beliefs about differences in sexuality are false. Still, women and men have used sexuality differently. Gender inequality and conflict between the sexes are largely responsible for these differences. In turn, these sexual oppositions have added to the discord and dislike between women and men.

PURSUIT AND RESISTANCE

The most important schism between female and male sexuality in our society concerns motivations and power: men initiate, women submit. This distinction permeates social life. Even our language reflects this expectation. Men fuck, screw, or lay women. Women get fucked, screwed, or laid by men. The active form of the verbs are reserved for men. Individuals deviate from these expectations, probably more now than ever before. Still, these people stand out as exceptions from what we believe normal and appropriate.

The popular distinction between assertive males and passive females underestimates the divergent sexuality of men and women. The image of the sexually assertive male suggests a simple absence of inhibition. In truth, masculinity involves an obsessional drive toward sexual conquest that far transcends a mere lack of inhibition.¹³⁰ Men do not simply feel relaxed and open to sexual encounters. They persistently seek them out, feeling that they must have sex. They become preoccupied with sex, even if it proves invariably unsatisfying. Men's obsession with female conquest goes well beyond uninhibited sexuality. Lust alone cannot account for their behavior.¹³¹

Analogously, the image of the sexually passive female suggests mere indifference. In truth, femininity implies active resistance to sexuality. Recall that women experience sexual excitement similarly to men, they are aroused as often as men, and they often provoke men's sexual interest. Sexual inhibitions cannot account for this behavior. Women's resistance to sexual activity commonly involves a denial and control of desire. Thus *conquest* and *resistance* more accurately characterize the contrast between male and female sexuality than do initiation and passivity.

Several other gender differences in sexuality build on and reinforce this major contrast between sexually acquisitive men and resistant women. Men and women find different attributes of the other sex arousing. They have divergent concerns with the giving and receiving of sexual pleasure. They use sexual attraction differently. And they respond differently to the relationship between sexuality and love. Lets consider each of these briefly.

¹³⁰ Person, Ethel. "Sexuality as the Mainstay of Identity: Psychoanalytic Perspectives." *Signs* 5 (1980):661-685.

¹³¹ Or male lust has been exaggerated by social conditions beyond what we would expect in sexually egalitarian circumstances.

CONTRASTING EROTIC SYMBOLS

The distinctive characteristics that make women and men sexually desirable to each other simultaneously evoke fear by symbolizing the other sex's sources of power. The symbols of desire function as criteria by which people judge the relative desirability of women and men. These criteria reflect gender inequality. They evoke symbolic oppositions between female and male sexuality.

The symbolism of female submission attaches erotic value to characteristics of masculine superiority. Women have fantasies about men who are tall, strong, confident, successful leaders. Men's power--physical, economic, and social--becomes central to sexual attractiveness. Yet, women commonly resent men's efforts to dominate them and they resent men's collective social ascendancy. So women emphasize erotic attraction to the same power they fear. This induces an intense tension over sexuality.

The symbolism of male sexual domination attaches erotic value more to women's physical and psychological characteristics and less to their social standing. A man typically has fantasies about physically attractive women who are sexually inaccessible to others but passionately obsessed with him. A woman becomes sexually exciting by being worthy of conquest. But men resent women's use of sexual attraction and sexual denial as a means of interpersonal control. Therefore, men ambivalently attach the greatest erotic value to the women they most fear.

Thus women and men confront divergent erotic symbolism defining sexual object choices. These are consistent with their social statuses. In each case the erotic symbolism harbors an essential tension by equating what is desired with what is resented.¹³²

¹³² The determinants of the criteria of attractiveness associated with each sex are illusive. Conceptions of physical attractiveness for both sexes probably develop from universal experiences of aesthetic pleasure in symmetrical, balanced, and healthy features combined with culturally specific attributes associated with status. But power and status, and the symbols associated with them, become sexual criteria that compete with physical and personality attractions. In the current culture, wealth, professional success, and physical prowess are gaining greater value as sources of sexual attractiveness for *women*.

GIVING AND RECEIVING PLEASURE

Not only does gender inequality affect the criteria of sexual attractiveness, it also causes women and men to experience sexual pleasure through opposing forms of arousal. Both emphasize women as the objects of sexual pleasure.

The idea of female sexual narcissism refers to this difference. The hypothesis of female sexual narcissism suggests that women seek sexual satisfaction through the actions of men on them rather than taking men as sexual objects. Both women and men, according to this idea, take women's bodies as a focus of sexual excitement.

Crude but plausible support for this hypothesis can be found in people's sexual fantasies. Men fantasize more about doing things to others. Women fantasize more about having things done to them.¹³³

On the surface these may appear merely complementary expectations based on the image of initiating males and passive females. More deeply, however, this implies a more general orientation of women, rejecting men as sexual objects in favor of conceiving them as instruments to release their own female sexual potential. Men do the opposite.¹³⁴

¹³³ When I asked students in one class to evaluate whether their sexual fantasies most commonly involved them acting on and sexually arousing someone else or being acted on by others, 100% of the males predominantly had fantasies about arousing someone else while 80% of the females mainly had fantasies about someone arousing them.

¹³⁴ So expressed, this may appear inconsistent with the common complaint that women have been sexually short changed in this and similar societies. It should. The characterizations of sexuality that suggest men have received greater sexual pleasure than women are largely speculative fantasy. This is not to deny the historical commonality of sexual domination and sexual brutality practiced by men. It is, however, an error to equate the number of orgasms (higher for males) with the amount of sexual pleasure. To assume that a passive woman lying with her legs spread provides men with significant sexual pleasure because this is the sort of sex men learn to expect (and may be the only kind available) is logically also to suggest that women should equally enjoy it for the same reasons.

I would go further to argue that the often cited performance anxieties associated with male sexuality do not result from a man's need to maintain an erection, but from the absence of evidence of a man's success in sexually stimulating a woman. Women do not experience similar performance anxiety because they have two kinds of evidence: (1) a man's erection is assumed (incorrectly) to prove his sexual pleasure, and (2) a man commonly initiates and pursues sexual encounters. But men can become and remain erect without good sexual arousal. Moreover, men pursue sex even when the results are consistently poor. Recent discussions of female orgasms and clitoral stimulation that correctly criticized the average quality of male sexual activity have taken an insupportably benign view of women's sexual performance.

Further, I would suggest that to the degree that men fear women's sexuality, it is not

SEXUAL ATTRACTION

Moreover, women and men adopt contrasting and inconsistent attitudes toward sexual provocation and sexual activity. Women use clothes, makeup, and gestures to define themselves as sexual objects in social interactions. Yet, they actively resist sexual overtures by men. Men make far less effort to present themselves as sexually desirable. Yet, they are much more devoted to initiating sexual interactions. Something seems out of kilter.

Women's sexually charged presentation might be due simply to women's identity as sexual objects (as some authors have suggested). This interpretation, however, ignores the inconsistency between presentation and action. If women so assimilate an identity as sexual objects, why do they so resist sexual activity? As I shall discuss presently, a more convincing interpretation links the two phenomena. Women's sexualized presentation of self contributes to the effects of their sexual resistance. Remember, sexual resistance is not simply a manifestation of sexual passivity. It is a female strategy under conditions of inequality.

Similarly, we could attribute men's indifference about sexual self presentation to their reliance on status to attract women. This reflects both sexes' focus on women as the object of sexuality. Still, men's avoidance of sexual self presentation remains inconsistent with their aggressive pursuit of sex. We can speculate how men's avoidance of sexual provocation in dress develops out of gender conflict. Men might object to the feminine associations of provocation through dress. Men's freedom to be sexually provocative through words and deeds might function as a substitute. And women's resistance might render male sexual displays ineffective.

LOVE AND SEX

Women and men also express divergent concerns with the relationship between love and sexuality. Women more often demand the trappings of love before initiating sexual relationships. Women, however, tend to idealize their lovers less, are more practical in their approach to romance, and exhibit less depression when romances end.¹³⁵

because women appear to have inexhaustible sexual desires or capacities, but because women have made men fear themselves unable to evoke sexual pleasure. Men have not experienced women in this society as sexually ravenous. Rather women appear indifferent or opposed to sex. This can evoke male fears of inadequacy, not because a man feels a woman may want more sex than he can supply, but because he fears her resistant passivity means that he is incapable of getting her sexually excited at all.

¹³⁵Rubin, ...

Again, on the surface this appears peculiar, ambiguous, and inconsistent. It becomes sensible, however, when considered as a whole. If women insist on evidence of their partner's love as a prerequisite to sex it is not because they are more romantic than men.

Instead, they have learned to resist sex with men they covet until they have gained a secure emotional grasp on them. Because of their subordinate social status, women need to use love and sexuality as resources. This motivates women to grasp conscious control over them more often. Men are freer to enjoy or suffer unrestrained feelings.

DIFFERENCES REAL AND UNREAL

To sum up the discussion, the sexuality of women and men differs but not in the ways cultural myths lead us to expect. In contrast to the content of current ideology, women and men have remarkably similar physical experiences of sex, rates of arousal, fantasies, rates for sexual activity of all kinds, concern with intercourse as a component of sexual activity, and vulnerability to possessive jealousy. The major real differences between female and male sexuality concern the opposition between women's resistance to sexual activity and men's obsessive pursuit of it. While this contrast is not inconsistent with ideological expectations, it is often obscured by the popular, understated characterizations of women as passive and men as uninhibited. Popular ideology also misconstrues or disguises several other related differences between female and male sexuality. These include gender differences in the characteristics of sexual object choices that are valued as arousing, the place of self and other in sexual arousal (the hypothesis of female sexual narcissism), the relation between sexual provocation and sexual motives, and the relation between sexuality and love.

The mythological differences between male and female sexuality disguise, justify, and validate the real differences in sexual practices and their origins in gender inequality. The numerous myths about differences in women's and men's sexual experience imply that sexual relations between the sexes are due to inherent differences. They deny the source of women's and men's sexual motivations and strategies. These arise in conflicts due to social inequality.

The real differences between female and male sexuality show two outstanding common qualities. First, they are not simply a set of characteristics that appear to differ by sex. They are a series of oppositions between female and male sexuality. They are ways in which female and male sexuality have diverged as a response to each other and the fundamental facts of gender inequality. Second, these oppositions all contribute to heightening the tensions between women and men. Born out of the opposition between the sexes, each produces additional sources of frustration and conflict between women and men.

How Has Gender Inequality Determined Sexuality?

Gender inequality has shaped sexuality through two complex, often obscure, and contradictory processes. Men have expressed their dominance through their sexuality. Women have used their sexuality to fight their subordination. Neither men nor women have had the sexual motives that they would possess under conditions of equality. Both sexes try to manipulate sexuality to fit their needs. Feminist analyses of sexuality have emphasized the imposition of exploitative sexuality by dominant men. While this has been telling, sexuality does not simply mirror men's need or symbolize male dominance. Women have also effectively used sexuality as a resource to offset their subordination. Sexuality is less a reflection of the characteristics of men or women than of the relationship between them.

DOMINANCE EXPRESSED IN SEXUALITY

An extensive feminist literature, nonetheless, has portrayed female (and, to a lesser degree, male) sexuality as an unfortunate perversion of human potentials resulting directly from male dominance. It claims that women suffer an alienated and objectified sexuality. They experience only debased male projections of female sexuality. The culture controlled by men imposes this restrictive sexuality. For example, in a well known article, Linda Phelps argued that women are sexually oriented toward "a false world of symbol and fantasy. . . the world of sex as seen through male eyes. It is a world where eroticism is defined in terms of female powerlessness, dependency, and submission."¹³⁶

Imposing Male Fantasies. The argument that male dominance directly explains sexuality starts with two assumptions. First, men have an ascendant position in society. Second, men and women have different and inconsistent sexual desires. Because men monopolize positions of power in the economy, government, and other major institutions, they are dominant throughout social life. Supposedly, this gives men the capacity to impose their sexual needs and fantasies on women. While women might be equally motivated to seek sexual satisfaction (most accounts neglect this question) men have greater capacity to realize their wishes. Men do so both as individuals and through their collective control of social institutions.

Thus, according to this argument, men impose their sexual desires and fantasies on women. Because of their position and their inability to become pregnant, sex has few risks or negative consequences for men, and sexual

¹³⁶ Phelps, "Female Sexual Alienation." Pp. 18-26 in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, Jo Freeman (ed.). 2nd ed. P. 19.

abstinence has no value. Instead, in the face of women's resistance, sexual conquest becomes a sign of masculinity. This ideology of conquest rebounds to cause men to possessively *protect* the women they *own* from conquest by other men. This perspective also attributes sexually related phenomena like prostitution, pornography, and rape to inequality and its collective defense. All reinforce men's assertiveness.

As a result, what cultural ideology represents as female sexuality is a projection of male fantasies about women. In general, women experience sexuality through masculine symbols and myths within their environment of subordination. Women therefore are sexually submissive, abused, alienated, and unfulfilled.

Could Omnipotence Serve So Poorly? Several problems arise in this effort to attribute sexuality to the simple, direct imposition of dominant men. It assumes an unrealistic, monolithic male power. This power is so effective that all gender practices directly reflect men's needs or wishes. If this is true, why are men so consistently frustrated and angry about their sexual relations? Shouldn't men find that they get exactly what they want from women?

Similarly, this approach suggests that the sexual patterns characteristic of an unequal society should fulfill men more than would sex in an egalitarian society. Otherwise, why would men impose practices that decrease their well-being. This means that men's driven, repetitiously frustrated, sexuality in this society brings them greater pleasure than would open minded, friendly, egalitarian sexual relations. Who believes this?

Moreover, the simple male dominance explanation of sexuality assumes an inherent difference between women and men. This approach implies that men are guided by intrinsic sexual orientations. In contrast, women experience their sexuality only through socially constructed symbols. If male sexuality does not express inherent tendencies of the male animal, then it simply reflects power. But if male sexuality reflects power, it is no less of a social construction than is female sexuality. Part of the problem here is circular reasoning. Since men are powerful, they are in a better position to influence sexuality. Therefore, sexual practices must be owing to male power. Research findings and theoretical analysis suggest it is much more sensible to interpret both female and male sexuality as a product of the environment.

In short, the simple attribution of sexuality to male desires imposed by their dominance stumbles against evidence of widespread male sexual dissatisfaction, and the implausibility of an inherent, presocial male sexuality.

RESISTANCE EXPRESSED IN SEXUALITY

Women, moreover, are not merely passive victims to male dominance. Despite the disabling ideology of female inferiority, women, like all people in a similar position, do not suffer their subordination gladly. They actively respond to their condition within the limits possible. But men's control of the major social institutions has left women little means. Women have lacked equal economic opportunity. They have been poorly represented in government and ill used by the law. Consequently, they have had few options. Necessarily, women have tried to counter their subordination through the manipulation of everyday life.

An Inalienable Resource. Sexuality is one thing that men want that women can hope to control even while they are socially subordinate. Women's sexuality therefore is a strategic resource. Lacking access to positions that bring power or resources, isolated from any hope of collective protest, only occasionally able to perceive their common interests, women have long resorted to resisting subordination by manipulating intimate relations.

Women practice sexual resistance, whereby they control their sexuality to achieve other ends. Sexual activity necessarily and naturally arises as an issue between men and women. Humans have an appetite for sex, based in biology, channeled through psychological structures. By playing on men's sexual desires, stimulating them and then refusing to fulfill them, women acquire a minor lever to use against men. Women's sexuality therefore stresses self-control over the value of sexual fulfillment to meet the objective of countering men's social power.

Virtue's Value. The purpose of women's sexual resistance is repeatedly made evident to people by culture and experience. The ideology of female sexuality has long emphasized virtue. A loss of virtue could expose women to the whims of men and eliminate their right to a respectable place in society, understood to mean a good marriage. While men learn to prove themselves through sexual conquest, women learn to achieve virtue through sexual denial. Men do not lose their virtue through sexual activity (unless they are considered *perversions*).

This infamous double standard communicates the purpose of sexual resistance. Men do not retain their virtue. They never have it to lose. When women lose their sexual virtue, they lose one dependable lever to use against men. This knowledge has kept the purpose of women's sexual resistance within the reach of both women and men.

Historically, the risk of pregnancy has also motivated women to withhold sexuality. Still, gender inequality has been the root cause. Even married women once practiced sexual abstinence to avoid the burden of unwanted pregnancies in the absence of dependable contraception. But for unmarried women the fear of pregnancy reflected social burdens. Pregnancy without a husband would ensure a woman's permanent descent from propriety. This does not mean that unmarried

women avoided all sexual activity. Intercourse was much less dangerous if men could be expected to marry a woman if she became pregnant. This is why sexuality becomes so much more common once a couple have been *promised*. Still, the symbol of the fallen woman long served as a forceful reminder that women should practice sexual self-control to preserve their social position.

Thus women's fear of pregnancy was as much a result of their subordinate social position as their biology. By using sexual control they avoided exaggerating their subordination by becoming pregnant.

Resistance Without Artifice. Women can use sexual resistance, and commonly have, without being aware that they are assailing male power. Instead, they think of themselves as following the rules for virtuous conduct. In this, they resemble the many men who do not understand that their actions are based on and sustain the subordination of women (see Chapters 7 on ideology). Experience teaches women the practical value of sexual self-control.

But women first learn self-control is *proper* through their socialization. Rather than striving to resist male power, women can aim for simple virtue and goodness. As cultural norms prescribe sexual resistance as a requirement for virtue, individual women do not need to recognize or acknowledge its strategic value.

Owing to the ideology of virtue, women's sexual resistance offers not only some control of men, but also a sense of moral superiority. Refusing sex becomes a strategy for subordinated women to achieve a compensatory moral ascendancy over dominant males. Women's abstention earns them the right to consider themselves the moral superiors of the men who dominate them.

The ideal of female virtue has contradictory effects on women's status. In this it resembles the religious ideologies of some subordinate groups--e.g., the Catholicism of feudal peasants or the Protestantism of 19th century capitalist workers. The ideal of virtue enhances women's sense of their worth. But it also commits women to accept and reinforce their subordinate status in society. Women seeking virtue have had to avoid the morally degrading arenas of male identified activities.¹³⁷

Inciting Pursuit. Despite the moralistic emphasis on virtue, women's sexual resistance encourages the adoption of sexual provocation. By using sexually provocative clothes, cosmetics, and postures, women incite the sexual advances that they resist.

¹³⁷ A more general discussion of the ideology of women's virtue appears in Chapter 6 on ideology.

Sexually provocative displays have not been monopolized by wayward women. Not all women use overt sexual provocation, of course. And in earlier periods, women adhered to much more restrictive codes of dress and behavior. But even women's conservative clothing and behavior have commonly carried a powerful potential for sexual provocation. What behavior has erotic value is socially constructed and historically specific. A simple display of an ankle in one period may equal the wearing of a transparent blouse in another. Regardless of reigning standards and regardless of the variations among individuals, women, not men, have used sexual provocation systematically.

Sexual provocation increases the value of sexual resistance. In part, women's sexual provocation directly reflects men's sexual wishes. It is a strategy in women's competition for men's attention. Insofar as sexually provocative women attract men and women want men's attention, women will use provocative. Provocative attraction also has close links with sexual denial. Used sparingly, provocation becomes a strategy that enhances the value of women's sexual resistance. Resisting sex becomes more valuable as men become more eager. At the same time, however, this provocation reinforces men's assertiveness (and probably their anger at women who they perceive responsible for their frustrations).

Emotional Manipulation. Mixing sexual provocation with sexual resistance helps women manipulate love. As discussed above, women historically have commonly sought to refuse sex until their partners appear emotionally committed. Yet, women approach love more pragmatically than men do. They have used men's love, emotional dependence, and commitment as a lever to offset men's greater independence and social power. Sexual provocation and resistance can help to attract men, keep them attentive, and foster their emotional attachment.

The control of one's own and others' deep emotional attachments, however, is much more difficult and less dependable than the control of sexual behavior. Men, too, can manipulate emotional ties. Women are probably as likely to become victims as victors. Nonetheless, if sexual resistance is a short term strategy by women to reduce men's power over them, love is the associated long term strategy.

Taming the Tiger. Sexual provocation's strategic value depends on women's capacity to successfully resist men's sexual advances. When successful, sexual resistance can allow women to obtain tacit bargains with men. Women trade sex for emotional concern, economic support, commitment, and men's foregoing the use of their power. Within specific interactions, this involves the manipulation of men's sexual excitement. Over time, they must maintain men's interest through measured strategies of invitation, hesitation, fulfillment, and withdrawal. As both a short and a long term strategy, sexual resistance can succeed only if men cannot

enforce their sexual desires or if men value women's willing participation in sexual activity.

Virtue Exalted. Sexual provocation has often been at odds with other actions by which women tried to reduce men's sexual assertiveness and expectations. Women have sometimes perceived men's sexual assertiveness less as an opportunity for acquiring bargaining power than as a threat to their well being. Some organizations foster an asexual image of women to gain their allegiance. Religious organizations have been the most persistent advocates of feminine asexuality. Women's movements associated with religions have often aimed their sights at the social restriction of male sexuality. Such organization transforms women's sexual resistance from an individual to a collective strategy. By legitimating sexual resistance and placing male sexuality on the defensive, women become more able to practice sexual resistance successfully.

Virtue Abandoned. Provocative sexuality has become increasingly blatant over the past century. This probably stems from the decline in men's power over women. Women's reduced dependence on religious antidotes for their subordination may have also contributed. Over time, virtuous women have adopted the demeanor once associated with *painted women*. Urbanization, opportunities for college, and jobs made women less dependent on their families and less concerned about their reputations for virtue within small, stable communities. This let them dramatize and heighten the extent of sexual provocation. As it became available, contraception and abortion also dramatically reduced women's fear that sex might ruin their lives through pregnancy.

Strategies of the Subservient. Women may contribute to their own sexual deprivation by using sexuality to resist men, but this can appear worthwhile if it gains them enough leverage against men's objectively superior position. Since women experience as much sexual desire and are capable of as much sexual pleasure as men, the strategy of sexual resistance requires that they forego pleasure to resist subordination. Moreover, this pattern of sexuality reinforces female sexual narcissism, the common psychological condition (discussed previously) where women focus on themselves as the objects of men's desires. But, while women have lacked other resources with which to fight men's dominance, sexual resistance was worth its price.

Thus, women's sexual resistance has the instrumental objective of reducing women's subordination in intimate relations, although it is experienced through an ideology of moral aspirations for a life of virtue. But it also results in women's active reinforcement of their subordination by decreasing their sexual freedom, it leads to an ideology of virtue that constrains their opportunities for participation in non-domestic life, and it heightens men's frustration and anger at women.

Intimate Conflict

In conclusion, gender inequality produces the oppositions and tensions between male and female sexuality through two associated processes. Men impose their desires and fantasies on women and on cultures a result of their dominance. Simultaneously, women use sexuality as a resource to ameliorate their subordination. These cross currents make sexuality overwhelmingly conflict ridden. It both attracts and repels. What is desired is feared. This tangle of tension and hidden motives produces the ideological deceptions and misconceptions through which we know sexuality.

Owing to their inequality, women and men make a battle ground of sexuality. Neither can be termed victors in this conflict. In historical conditions like feudalism, when men's abusive physical power reduced women's capacity for effective resistance, sexuality probably appeared much more purely a reflection of men's control. Even then, however, good sex required women's active participation, which is difficult to obtain by coercion. More generally, good sexual relations depend on trust, openness, and reciprocity. These are difficult enough to foster between people who are objectively unequal. But the desire for sex, even more than the need for reproduction, has driven women and men inexorably toward each other, regardless of the repellent feelings aroused by inequality and conflict.

Because the opposition between women's and men's sexuality, and the false ideological beliefs about sexual differences, are the consequence of inequality, they should diminish if equality grows. When women and men have similar social statuses, opportunities, and representation in power, men will have little capacity to impose sexual practices. Women will have little motive to use sexual resistance. The past two decades have seen a trend in this direction. I suspect that study of young professional women's and men's current sexual practices will show that they have become remarkably similar.

We have ignored the claims of one branch of feminist theory (part of *radical feminism*) that the goal of controlling women's sexuality is the root cause of male domination. They argue that sexuality is not only a product of equality and gender conflict, that it not only reinforces that inequality by deepening the hostility between the sexes, but sexuality is the crucial source of inequality and its effects.¹³⁸ These theorists have made a contribution by raising the question of

¹³⁸ MacKinnon, Catherine. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7 (1982): 515-44. MacKinnon, Catharine A. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence." *Signs* 8 (1983): 635-658. Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience." *Signs* 5 (1980): 631-661. Kathleen Barry. *Female Sexual Slavery*. Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our*

the relationship between sexuality and inequality, but their attempt to make sexuality the central issue of gender inequality fails. As shown in the analysis here, sexuality is not a simple imposition of men, but an arena of conflict and a resource for women. Moreover, gender dominance does not give men good or frequent sex in this or, as far as I can discover, any other society. And it is not credible that the explanation of women's and men's unequal economic and political power, the conflicts over family power, and the reproduction of inequality through history can be reduced to men's desires to control women's sexuality and reproduction. Sex produces tensions both because it is an extraordinary biological urge that defies the veneer of civilization and because it is a need of dominant men that can only be well met through the voluntary actions of subordinate women. The analyses of these authors is based on assumptions just the opposite of what is true. Sex is not the focus of so much dispute because its control is the primary objective of gender inequality, but because dominance does not allow men either to avoid or to control sex.

Will: Men, Women and Rape. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975.