

Are Women Bad at Orgasms? Understanding the Gender Gap
By Lisa Wade, PhD

DISCLOSURE

This draft may not match the final draft.

CITATION

Wade, Lisa. 2015. Are Women Bad at Orgasms? Understanding the Gender Gap. Pp. 227-237 in *Gender, Sex, and Politics: In the Streets and Between the Sheets in the 21st Century*, edited by Shira Tarrant. New York: Routledge.

ABSTRACT

Women who have sex with men have about one orgasm for every three her partner enjoys. We call this the “orgasm gap,” a persistent average difference in the frequency of orgasm for men and women who have heterosexual sex. In this paper, I discredit one common explanation for this gap—the idea that women are somehow bad at orgasms—and offer alternative explanations for the gendered asymmetry in this one type of sexual pleasure: a lack of knowledge, the de-prioritization of female sexual pleasure, sexual objectification and self-objectification, and the coital imperative in the sexual script.

Are Women Bad at Orgasms? Understanding the Gender Gap

By Lisa Wade, PhD

Women who have sex with men have about one orgasm for every three her partner enjoys.ⁱ We call this the “orgasm gap,” a persistent average difference in the frequency of orgasm for men and women who have heterosexual sex. I want to discredit one common explanation for this gap—the idea that women are somehow bad at orgasms—and offer alternative explanations for the gendered asymmetry in this one type of sexual pleasure.

The common cultural narrative about men’s orgasms is that, if anything, they arrive too easily and too quickly. Sex advice for men tends to focus on the need to prolong sexual activity by delaying orgasm. Premature ejaculation, we are frequently reminded, is among the few sexual dysfunctions that plague men. The idea that men have orgasms at will, even against their will, is part of what we collectively understand to be true.

In contrast, the female orgasm is portrayed as elusive.ⁱⁱ If women don’t have orgasms, the narrative about women’s bodies suggests that it’s because the clitoris is hard to find and complicated to operate; it’s shy and persnickety. It requires special attention on his part and the right mindset on hers and, even so, it often fails to show. And perhaps it doesn’t matter anyway, we continue, because we’re not sure that women are as interested in orgasm as men. They’re physiologically different, we tell ourselves. Nah, women just don’t *need* orgasm as much; they’re really in it for the eye contact and the cuddling.

These types of justifications—that women’s bodies are less primed for physical pleasure and that women likely care less about it anyway—are part of how we naturalize the orgasm gap.

They make the prioritization of men's sexual release seem normal and unproblematic. There is nothing, however, inevitable about this.

Variation in the Frequency of Female Orgasm

We know that the orgasm gap isn't natural because rates of orgasm for women vary. Women who sleep with women, for example, have many more orgasms than women who sleep with men.ⁱⁱⁱ Lesbians and bisexual women have orgasms about 83% of the time. That's three times as often as women who have sex with men, or about the same frequency that *men* who sleep with women enjoy.

Women also have no problem experiencing orgasm through masturbation.^{iv} Fewer than 5% of women who masturbate fail to reach orgasm routinely as a part of doing so.^v In masturbation, orgasms come easily and quickly to women. On average, they need just four minutes, the same amount of time it takes men who are masturbating.^{vi} Even women who don't frequently have orgasms with other people, often easily find ways to climax when they're by themselves.^{vii}

New data offers another window into women's varying orgasm rates. Sociologist Elizabeth Armstrong and colleagues analyzed quantitative data on the likelihood of orgasm among about 15,000 heterosexual college students.^{viii} Table One shows the likelihood that men and women will orgasm in a first-time hookup (a casual sexual encounter), higher order hookups (more hookups with the same person), and relationships.

The orgasm gap between men and women in first time hookups reflects the national average: women have one for every three men have. But the chance that she will have an orgasm increases when they hookup a second or third time, and relationships offer women the most orgasms. Men experience more orgasms over repeated encounters as well, but women's likelihood increases faster, such that the orgasm gap shrinks too: he has 3.1 orgasms for every one of hers in first time hookups, 2.5 in second and third hookups, 2.1 in fourth and further hookups, and 1.25 in relationships. Women in relationships, then, are having almost seven times as many orgasms as women hooking up for the first time; the orgasm gap has shrunk by more than half.

Table One: Percent of Men and Women Having an Orgasm in Four Sexual Contexts

	men	women
# of hookups		
1 st hookup	31%	10%
2 nd or 3 rd hookup	43%	17%
4+ hookups	64%	31%
In a relationship	85%	68%

If we add another variable—whether each sexual encounter included oral sex performed on the female partner, intercourse, or self-clitoral stimulation—the data gets even more

interesting. In Table Two, looking now only at rates of orgasm for women, we see a dramatically wide range of frequency: from a 15% chance of orgasm on the far upper corner (a first time hookup including oral sex only) to a 92% chance on the far right bottom corner (a relationship event including all three activities). Both additional hookups and a wider range of activities tend to increase women's rate of orgasm. When couples in relationships engage in all three activities, women's orgasms become nearly universal and her rate of orgasm almost converges with men's. Men in that situation have an orgasm 96% of the time, so the orgasm gap has shrunk to 1.04 to 1.

Table Two: Percent of Women Having an Orgasm in Four Sexual Contexts, by Occurrence of Selected Sexual Behaviors

	oral sex	intercourse	intercourse + oral	intercourse + self-stimulation	all three
# of hookups					
1 st hookup	15%	26%	37%	32%	63%
2 nd or 3 rd hookup	31%	32%	29%	50%	62%
3 rd + hookups	22%	40%	55%	63%	71%
In a relationship	66%	55%	80%	74%	92%

A woman's likelihood of experiencing an orgasm with sexual activity, then, varies according to whether she's alone or with someone else, the sex of the person she's with, the nature of her relationship with that person, and the types of activities they include. Under the right circumstances, her chance of orgasm is almost exactly that of his.

This suggests that the orgasm gap cannot be driven purely by biology, but instead is related, at least in part, to decisions that individuals and couples make about whether and how to involve clitoral stimulation in sexual activity. In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss four socio-cultural forces that contribute to the orgasm gap: a lack of knowledge; the prioritization of male sexual pleasure; the expectation that women be sexy, but not sexual; and the coital imperative in the sexual script.

A Lack of Knowledge about Female Orgasm

When I teach college classes on sexuality, I am on the frontlines of the failure of American sex education. I've been asked to confirm if it's true that women are physically incapable of orgasm before the age of 30. I've explained to a truly confused listener why women are unlikely to orgasm from anal sex, anatomically speaking. Students ask eagerly about how to find the g-spot—a scientifically-debated structure that might be found inside some women's vaginas and, if properly stimulated, may produce orgasm-like experiences for some women—but seem nervous to approach the clitoris, an external organ that appears to have no purpose except to easily provide sexual pleasure to women.^{ix} “Do we all have one of those?,” asked one female student when I covered the clitoris in a basic anatomy lesson.

If knowing it exists and finding it is a challenge, operating one seems even more so. I've seen the incredulous faces of my students when I tell them that they can't "make" a woman have an orgasm but should, instead, talk to her about what she likes; I may as well have told them to go to the moon to find out.

There's a good reason that young people are ignorant and unsure about female orgasm. When compared to the volume of conversation about other parts of our sexual anatomy—the homologous male organ, the penis, and female body parts more directly involved in reproduction—there is a cultural silence about the clitoris. It often gets short entries in dictionaries, anatomy textbooks, and sex education materials, if it's included at all.^x Only 15% of young adults report that they've learned anything of importance about the clitoris from their parents.^{xi} Sex education classes, which typically focus more on reproduction than sex per se, discuss male orgasm in the context of ejaculation but usually don't address female orgasm at all.^{xii}

Young people, then, often have limited knowledge of the clitoris and sometimes carry some major misconceptions. In one study, I tested college students' knowledge about the clitoris.^{xiii} Almost two-thirds of the students agreed with the false statement: "The clitoris is on the front wall of the vaginal canal." Nearly half of women and almost a third of men agreed with the statement, also false, that "the g-spot is another name for the clitoris." Ten percent of students believed that women urinate through their clitorises, as men do through their penises.^{xiv} More than a quarter—29% of women and 25% of men—failed to find the clitoris on a diagram. On average, they scored a 63% on the "cliteracy test." Interestingly, men and women performed equally badly.

A general lack of knowledge about the clitoris, then, may explain part of the orgasm gap. But there's another problem: neither men nor women may prioritize female orgasm.

A De-Prioritization of Female Orgasm

As Tables One and Two revealed, the orgasm gap in first time hookups is three-to-one, but the gap in relationships is half that. What changes as couples move from hooking up to a relationship?

There is good evidence that the importance of female orgasm changes. Both men and women often deprioritize the female orgasm in hookups. “I’m all about making her orgasm,” said a man interviewed for a study about orgasm among college students.^{xv} “The general her or like the specific her?” he was asked. “Girlfriend her,” he responded, “In a hookup her, I don’t give a shit.” Some other men agree:

If it’s just a random hookup... Say they meet a girl at a party and it’s a one night thing, I don’t think it’s gonna matter to them... But if you’re with somebody for more than just that one night... I know I feel personally responsible. I think it’s essential that she has an orgasm...^{xvi}

Women know the difference. Said one: "When I... meet somebody and I’m gonna have a random hookup... from what I have seen, they’re not even trying to, you know, make it a mutual thing."^{xvii} My own research confirms that college women often accept that hookups don’t include orgasms for women. One woman had hooked up with 13 men, but not one had given her an

orgasm. “The guy kind of expects to get off,” she explained, “while the girl doesn’t expect anything.”^{xviii}

Some women are disappointed by this state of affairs, but others feel that expecting an orgasm from a male hookup partner would be demanding or rude. One woman explained how she felt like she didn’t have the “right” to ask for an orgasm: “I didn’t feel comfortable I guess... I think I felt kind of guilty almost, like I felt like I was kind of subjecting [guys] to something they didn’t want to do and I felt bad about it.”^{xix}

While women’s interest in having an orgasm varies, there is some evidence that women may be coping with men’s disinterest in their orgasm by deemphasizing its value to themselves. They then put their energies into giving their partners pleasure.^{xx} Speaking of hookups, one woman insists: “I will do everything in my power to, like whoever I’m with, to get [him] off.”^{xxi} Another confessed, “Even if I was in charge, I did not make sure I was being pleased.”^{xxii}

Reflecting the quantitative data, women in relationships often feel very differently. They may feel entitled to orgasm and certain that their partners are concerned with their pleasure: “I know that he wants to make me happy,” said one college student about her boyfriend, “I know that he wants me to orgasm... we are connected and like we’re going for the same thing and that like he cares.”^{xxiii}

The different rates of orgasm for men and women, then, may be partly caused by a consistent interest in giving men orgasms, but a varying interest in the same for women. This isn’t the sexual double standard that women of the 1970s objected to—in which one group of women were “good girls” that men treated well and another group were “bad girls” they felt comfortable disrespecting—after all, on today’s college campuses women often transition from being hookup partners to girlfriends. Nevertheless, men are still the arbiters of when women are

“worthy” of their care and attention—not when she’s “just” a hookup partner, but more so when she’s a girlfriend—whereas men’s orgasms are considered important by both men and women regardless of the context.

The Imperative for Women to be Sexy, but Not Sexual

In a telling statement, Paris Hilton once told Rolling Stone magazine: “...my boyfriends always tell me I’m not sexual. Sexy, but not sexual.”^{xxiv} There’s a big difference. Sexual people *experience* desire. They feel lust, desire, and passion. In contrast, sexy people *inspire* desire. They stir sexual people to have those feelings.

Most people want to be both sexy *and* sexual, to be desired and to have desire. In the American cultural imagination, however, we tend to bifurcate those roles by gender. Men are sexual, women sexy. Men want, women want to be wanted. This is a problem; a sexy body is not necessarily a sexual body. The sexiness we’re talking about is sexy like a sports car is sexy. It’s a thing to be looked at, consumed, used, or owned. Admired, but only as we admire an object.

Women’s disinterest in their own orgasm may be caused by a sense that their role in sex is solely to deliver a sexy body. What’s important isn’t how she feels, what she thinks, or who she is... it’s how she looks. By this logic, women’s sexual desire and satisfaction is not really what sex is all about.

When a woman internalizes this message, we see self-sexual objectification, the process of identifying as an object of desire for others. This can lead to spectating, being worried about how one looks from a partner’s perspective. A woman who self-objectifies might try to stay in

sexual positions that she thinks are flattering, arrange her body and limbs to make herself look thinner or curvier, try to make sure her face doesn't do anything unattractive, and avoid making any embarrassing noises. She may even try to prevent her own orgasm because climaxing means losing control of these things.

So, some women have “out of body sexual experiences” in which they are constantly thinking about how she *looks* to the other person instead of focusing on how she *feels*. And, sure enough, irrespective of actual attractiveness, the degree to which women self-objectify correlates with lots of different measures of sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction. In other words, the more a woman worries about how she looks, the less likely she'll experience sexual desire, pleasure, and orgasm.

The Coital Imperative in the Sexual Script

While we like to think that our sexual encounters are spontaneous, they actually follow a rather rigid sexual script. This script is a set of rules that guide sexual interaction.^{xxv} It tends to be quite closely followed much of the time, especially when two people are first becoming sexual together.

The sexual script involves a “coital imperative,” a rule that, if heterosexual people are going to have sex, it must (eventually) include penile-vaginal intercourse.^{xxvi} In fact, penile-vaginal intercourse, or coitus, is the only act that almost everyone agrees counts as “real sex.”^{xxvii} It also quite consistently produces orgasm for men.

In contrast, only about 20% of women regularly have orgasms from the thrusting of coitus alone, while the activities that are more likely to produce orgasm in women—cunnilingus and manual stimulation of the clitoris—are often not considered sex at all.^{xxviii} Likewise, most people call themselves virgins until the first time they have intercourse, no matter how many other sexual activities they've engaged in. And, if two people have never engaged in coitus, it's often an open question whether they've ever had sex, even if they've done other sexual things. A sexual encounter that doesn't include intercourse may even be seen as a failed encounter, because the couple didn't "go all the way."

So, by virtue of the coital imperative, the sexual script includes a concerted effort to give him an orgasm, but not her. Moreover, partly because coitus is so often treated as the end goal of sexual activity, his orgasm signals the end whether she's had an orgasm or not.^{xxix} Her orgasm rarely signals the end of sexual activity, nor is it a measure of whether sex was had. It's, instead, incidental: a nice addition, a sign that the sex was good perhaps, but wholly unnecessary to the endeavor.

To close, it's high time we stop pretending that women are bad at orgasms. The gap between men's and women's frequency of orgasm is not an inevitable fact of life. It is, instead, strongly impacted by social forces that privilege men's pleasure over women's: an ignorance about the clitoris, a prioritization of men's pleasure, the gendered sexy/sexual binary, and a coital imperative. Both men and women tend to internalize this logic, naturalizing and justifying the orgasm gap. In fact, the orgasm gap is a social artifact and it can be changed at will.

ⁱ John Gagnon, Robert Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱ Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "Faking Like a Woman? Towards an Interpretive Theorization of Sexual Pleasure," *Body & Society* 13, no. 2 (2007): 95-116.

Maya Lavie-Ajayi and Hélène Joffe, "Social Representations of Female Orgasm," *Journal of Health Psychology* 14 no. 1 (2009): 98-107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heather Armstrong and Elke Reissing, "Women Who Have Sex with Women: A Comprehensive Review of the Literature and Conceptual Model of Sexual Function," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 28, no. 4 (2013): 364-399.

Marcia Douglass and Lisa Douglass, *Are We Having Fun Yet?* (New York, Ny.: Hyperion, 1997).

John Harvey, Amy Wenzel, and Susan Sprecher, *The Handbook of Sexuality in Close Relationships* (Mahwah, Nj.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde Martin, and Paul Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Saunders, 1953).

Elisabeth Lloyd, *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Sharon Thompson, "Search for Tomorrow: On Feminism and the Reconstruction of Teen Romance," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (London: Pandora, 1989).

^{iv} John Harvey, Amy Wenzel, and Susan Sprecher, *The Handbook of Sexuality in Close Relationships* (Mahwah, Nj.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

^v Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* (New York, Ny.: Seven Stories Press, 1976).

Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde Martin, and Paul Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Saunders, 1953).

^{vi} Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, Clyde Martin, and Paul Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Saunders, 1953).

^{vii} Lisa Wade, Emily Kremer, and Jessica Brown, "The Incidental Orgasm: The Presence of Clitoral Knowledge and the Absence of Orgasm for Women," *Women & Health* 42, no. 1 (2005): 117-138.

^{viii} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, "Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (2012): 435-462.

^{ix} Elisabeth Lloyd, *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

^x Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, "Telling it Straight? Dictionary Definitions of Women's Genitals," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, no. 2 (2001): 214-232.

Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power* (London: Tufnell Press, 1998).

Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis, Mn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Lisa Jean Moore and Adele Clarke, "Clitoral Conventions and Transgressions: Graphic Representations in Anatomy Texts, c1900-91," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 255-301.

Shirley Ogletree and Harvey Ginsburg, "Kept Under the Hood: Neglect of the Clitoris in Common Vernacular," *Sex Roles* 43, no11/12 (2000): 917-927.

^{xi} Sinikka Elliott, *Not My Kid: What Parents Believe About the Sex Lives of Their Teenagers* (New York, Ny.: New York University Press, 2012).

Lisa Wade, Emily Kremer, and Jessica Brown, "The Incidental Orgasm: The Presence of Clitoral Knowledge and the Absence of Orgasm for Women," *Women & Health* 42, no. 1 (2005): 117-138.

^{xii} Christine Beyer, Roberta Ogletree, Dale Ritzel, Judy Drolet, Sharon Gilbert, and Dale Brown, "Gender Representation in Illustrations, Text, and Topic Areas in Sexuality Education Curricula," *The*

Journal of School Health 66, no. 10 (1996): 361-364.

Linda Brock and Glen Jennings, "What Daughters in Their 30s Wish their Mothers had Told Them," *Family Relations* 42, no. 1 (1993): 61-65.

Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, *The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power* (London: Tufnell Press, 1998).

Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis, Mn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Shirley Ogletree and Harvey Ginsburg, "Kept Under the Hood: Neglect of the Clitoris in Common Vernacular," *Sex Roles* 43, no. 11/12 (2000): 917-927.

Deborah Tolman, "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles for/with Sexuality," *Gender & Society* 8, no. 3 (1994): 324-342.

^{xiii} Lisa Wade, Emily Kremer, and Jessica Brown, "The Incidental Orgasm: The Presence of Clitoral Knowledge and the Absence of Orgasm for Women," *Women & Health* 42, no. 1 (2005): 117-138.

^{xiv} Author's unpublished data.

^{xv} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, "Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (2012): 456.

^{xvi} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, "Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships," in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara Risman (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009): 456.

^{xvii} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, "Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (2012): 455.

^{xviii} Lisa Wade and Caroline Heldman, "Hooking Up and Opting Out: What Students Learn about Sex in their First Year of College," in *Sex for Life: From Virginity to Viagra, How Sexuality Changes*

Throughout our Lives, eds. John DeLamater and Laura Carpenter (New York, Ny.: New York University Press, 2012): 142.

^{xix} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, “Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships,” in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara Risman (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009): 457.

^{xx} Ellen Laan and Alessandra Rellini, “Can We Treat Anorgasmia in Women? The Challenge to Experiencing Pleasure,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 26, no. 4 (2011): 329-341.

^{xxi} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, “Accounting for Women’s Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships,” *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 3 (2012): 455.

^{xxii} Lisa Wade and Caroline Heldman, “Hooking Up and Opting Out: What Students Learn about Sex in their First Year of College,” in *Sex for Life: From Virginity to Viagra, How Sexuality Changes Throughout our Lives*, eds. John DeLamater and Laura Carpenter (New York, Ny.: New York University Press, 2012): 141-142.

^{xxiii} Elizabeth Armstrong, Paula England, and Alison Fogarty, “Orgasm in College Hookups and Relationships,” in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara Risman (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009): 454

^{xxiv} Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York, Ny.: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

^{xxv} John Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago, Il.: Aldine, 1973).

^{xxvi} Kathryn McPhillips, Virginia Braun, and Nicola Gavey, “Defining Heterosex: How Imperative is the ‘Coital Imperative’?” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24, no. 2 (2001): 229-240.

^{xxvii} Marian Pitts and Qazi Rahman, “Which Behaviors Constitute ‘Having Sex’ among University Students in the U.K.?” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 30, no. 2 (2001): 169-176.

Stephanie Sanders and June Machover Reinisch, “Would You Say You ‘Had Sex’ If...?” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, no. 3 (1999): 275-277.

^{xxviii} Elisabeth Lloyd, *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

^{xxix} Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, “Telling it Straight? Dictionary Definitions of Women’s Genitals,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, no. 2 (2001): 214-232.