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“Hot” is not the same as beautiful, it is a narrow, sellable version of sexiness

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that, when we allow that behaviour to be thought of as “not-sex”, that opens the door to risk.

This is especially true of oral sex. Its rise — and the idea that it is less intimate than intercourse — was the biggest change in 20th-century sexual behaviour. Girls frequently told me that engaging in it was “no big deal”, at least if boys were on the receiving end. They had a lot of reasons for performing it: to improve a relationship; to increase their popularity; to make them feel desired. It was also, they said, a strategy to avoid the emotional intimacy they feared would happen with full intercourse — what they called “catching feelings” (as if caring about someone was like a disease). It was also, sometimes, how they extricated themselves from an uncomfortable or threatening situation. One college fresher told me: “Sometimes you do it at the end of a night because you don’t want to sleep with a guy but he expects to be satisfied. So if I want him to leave and I don’t want anything to happen...”

There was so much to unpack in that short statement: why a young man should expect to be sexually satisfied; why a girl not only is not outraged, but considers it her obligation to comply; why she does not think oral sex constitutes “anything happening”; the pressure young women face in any personal relationship to put others’ needs before their own; the potential justification of assault with a chaser of self-blame.

The concern with pleasing over pleasure was pervasive among the girls I met. I heard so many stories of girls performing one-sided oral sex that I began asking, “What if every time you were with a boy he expected you to get him a glass of water from the kitchen, but he never got you a glass of water. You wouldn’t stand for it!”

They would laugh and say, “Well, when you put it that way...”

It was not just that boys were unwilling, it was that girls did not want it. They expressed a sense of shame and anxiety, a sense that their own genitals were simultaneously “icky” and “sacred”.

“A guy is totally aware of what he looks like down there,” said Rachel in Chicago, “but I don’t know what they’re seeing on me. I can’t see it.”

“Well,” I said, “there are these things called mirrors.”
 “Yeah,” Rachel said, dryly. “I’m not going to do that.”

Women’s feelings about their genitals have been directly linked to their enjoyment of sex. Yet Debby Herbenick, director of the Centre for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University, believes that girls’ genital self-image is “under siege”, with more pressure than ever to see their vulvae as unacceptable in their natural state. A 2015 study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* found that 70% of girls at college or university removed their pubic hair — all of it — at least on occasion, and more than half did so regularly. The girls I met called depilation a “personal choice”, explaining that it made them feel “cleaner”. Yet when I pressed further, a darker motivation emerged: avoiding humiliation. “Guys act like they would be disgusted by it,” one young woman told me.

The rhetoric of “choice” often masked deeper anxieties. On the one hand, girls would enthuse about pop icons such as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus and Nicki Minaj, who were “taking control” of their sexuality. Earlier generations of feminist-identified women, for instance, may have seen Kim Kardashian West’s “happy #internationalwomensday”

tweet and accompanying nude selfie (Instagram caption: “When you’re like I have nothing to wear LOL”) as something to denounce, but many of today’s generation talked about it as an expression — rather than an imposition — of sexuality.

Young women may not have a million-dollar entertainment empire to promote, but they can certainly relate to the need to trade on their physical assets to gain popularity. Everyone knows you get more “likes” in a bikini than an anorak. They talked about feeling simultaneously free to choose a sexualised image — which was nobody’s damn business but their own — and having no other choice. “You want to stand out,” one student explained. “It’s not just about being hot, but who can be the hottest.”

But as the journalist Ariel Levy pointed out in her book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, “hot” is not the same as “beautiful” or “attractive”. It is a narrow, commercialised vision of sexiness that, when applied to women, can be reduced to two words: “f***able” and “sellable”. No coincidence, Levy added, that this was “the literal job criteria for stars of the sex industry”. And maybe no coincidence that young people are growing up with far more access to porn than ever before.

The trend in hairlessness originated in porn, where it began as a trick to get a better camera shot. With the rise of the internet, though, the porn aesthetic, and porn itself, became ubiquitous. Sixty per cent of young people, according to a survey of UK university students, say they consult porn, in part as though it were an instruction manual. “It’s kind of nice to be able to use it to gain some knowledge of sex,” one girl told me. “Just to see how things fit together.” Curiosity about sex is natural, but porn is another realm in which female sexuality is presented as a performance for male pleasure; bodies — both men’s and women’s — are wildly distorted; humiliation, particularly of women, is eroticised; relationships are nonexistent.

Porn is also thought to be behind the biggest change in 21st-century sexual behaviour: the rise of anal sex. In 1992, 16% of women aged 18-24 said they had tried it. Today, according to the largest study on American sexual behaviour, 20% of young women aged 18 and 19 have, and by ages 20-24 it is 40%. A 2014 study of 16- to 18-year-old British heterosexuals found that it was mainly boys who pushed for what they were calling “fifth base”, approaching it less as a form of intimacy with a partner than a competition with other boys. They expected girls to endure the act, and accepted that they would need to be — and could be — coerced into it; the young women in the study consistently reported it as painful. Chillingly, both sexes blamed the girls for the discomfort, calling them “naive or flawed”, unable to “relax”.

Sara McClelland, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, writes about sexuality as a matter of “intimate justice”. It touches on fundamental issues of gender inequality, economic disparity, violence, body integrity, physical and mental health, self-efficacy and power dynamics in our most personal relationships, whether they last two hours or 20 years. According to Herbenick, when anal sex is included, 70% of women report pain in their sexual encounters. Even when it is not, about a third ➤➤➤

of young women experience pain, as opposed to about 5% of men. What is more, according to McClelland, women at university are more likely than men to use their partner's pleasure as the yardstick for their own satisfaction, saying things such as, "If he's sexually satisfied, then I'm sexually satisfied." Men are more likely to measure satisfaction by their own orgasm.

Conversely, when talking about bad sex, young women use terms such as humiliating, degrading, depressing, painful. Young men never use that language in the research. So when young women report satisfaction levels equal to or greater than young men's, which they often do in the research, that can be deceptive. If a girl goes into an encounter hoping it will not hurt, wanting to feel close to her partner and expecting that he will have an orgasm, she will be satisfied if those conditions are met. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be close to a partner, wanting him to be happy and orgasm is not the only measure of satisfaction, but still, absence of pain? That is an awfully low bar for sexual fulfilment.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised we perform the equivalent of an unintentional psychological clitoridectomy on our girls, silencing all discussion of their pleasure, their sexuality, their wants and needs. Parents tend to name all the body parts on their baby boys, but with girls, too often we go straight from stomach to knees. There is no better way to make something unspeakable than not to name it. Even the most comprehensive sex education lessons generally stick with a woman's internal parts: uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries. Those classic diagrams of a woman's reproductive system blur into a grey Y between the legs, as if the vulva and the labia, let alone the clitoris, do not exist. And whereas male puberty is often characterised in terms of erections, ejaculation and the emergence of a near-unstoppable sex drive, those years for girls are defined by menstruation and the possibility of unwanted pregnancy.

No wonder less than half of teenage girls aged 14-17 have masturbated. Often the only time they explore their nether regions is when they are removing their pubic hair. No wonder when they end up in bed with a boy they find it difficult to express their wants, needs and limits, or even know what those might be.

Interestingly, girls remain invested in their partner's pleasure whether that person is male or female. So young women climax in same-sex encounters at precisely the same rate as heterosexual men. Lesbian and bisexual girls talked to me about feeling liberated when they were with other girls, finally being able to go "off the script": free to create a sexual encounter that worked for them. No surprise such encounters are on the increase.

I asked one of the gay girls I met how she knew she was not a virgin any more. She thought for a moment, then said: "The first time I had an orgasm with a partner."

What if, just for a second, we imagined that was the definition. How would our whole approach to sexuality shift? What if, rather than thinking of sex as a race to a goal, young people conceptualised it as a pool of experiences — involving affection, warmth, closeness, desire, touch, arousal, intimacy. Because, truly, who is more sexually "experienced": the person

who has snogged a partner for three hours, experimenting with erotic tension, sensuality and communication, or the one who gets hammered at a party and hooks up with a "random" in order to unload her virginity before college?

The only way this shift can happen, though, is if adults talk more to their teenagers about sexuality, normalising those conversations, integrating them into everyday life, shifting our thinking about those intimate acts in the ways that we (mostly) have about women's public roles. Consider a 2010 study published in the *International Journal of Sexual Health* comparing the early experiences of nearly 300 randomly chosen American and Dutch women at two similar universities — mostly white, middle class, with similar religious backgrounds. So, apples to apples. The Americans, like the British, had become sexually active at a younger age than the Dutch, had had more encounters with more partners and were less likely to use birth control. They were also more likely to say they had first had intercourse because of pressure from friends or partners.

In subsequent interviews with some of the participants, the Americans, much like the ones I met, described interactions in which the men determined relationships, both sexes prioritised male pleasure and reciprocity was rare. And the Dutch? Their early sexual activity took place in caring, respectful relationships in which they communicated with their partners (whom they said they knew "very well") about what felt good and what did not, about how far they wanted to go, and what protection they would need. They reported more comfort with their bodies and their desires than the Americans and were more in touch with their own pleasure.

What is their secret? The Dutch girls said teachers and doctors had talked candidly to them about sex, pleasure and the importance of a mutual trust, even love. More than that, though, there was a stark difference in how their parents approached those topics. The American mothers had focused on the potential risks and dangers, while their fathers, if they said anything at all, stuck to lame jokes. Dutch parents, by contrast, had talked to their children from an early age about balancing joy with responsibility. As a result, one Dutch woman said she told her mother immediately after she first had intercourse, and that "my friend's mother also asked me how it was, if I had an orgasm and if he had one".

After talking to so many girls, I know what I hope for: I want sexuality to be a source of self-knowledge, creativity and communication despite its potential risks. I want them to revel in their bodies' sensuality without being reduced to it. I want them to be able to ask for what they want in bed, and to get it. I want them to be safe from disease, unwanted pregnancy, cruelty, dehumanisation and violence. It is a lot to ask for, but it is not too much. As teachers and parents and advocates, we encourage girls to have a voice and to expect egalitarian treatment in the home, in the classroom, in the workplace. Now it is time to demand that "intimate justice" in their personal lives as well ■

Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape by Peggy Orenstein (Oneworld £9.99) is out in paperback on October 6. *Girls and Sex: Dr Christian Fessen in conversation with Peggy Orenstein* is at the Condé Nast School of Fashion, 16-17 Greek Street, London W1, on October 4 at 7pm; 5x15.com



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