

Break the sexual glass ceiling

We're vocal about gender equality in the boardroom, so why are we silently settling for second best when it comes to the bedroom? **Gemma Askham** explores the taboo area where we're still coming last (if at all).

THE
EQUALITY-
ISSUE

Sex is finished when he comes? This is the title of a *Reddit* thread that gives a pretty insightful view of female pleasure in 2015. The fact that it garnered 364 responses instead of one word beginning with 'N' suggests the view isn't looking great. Close up, there's a pair of balls blocking it.

"I've had sex with 10 guys and only one has ever made an effort on a regular basis to get me off after he comes," the 30-year-old poster writes. "If the guy gets there first, I'm out of luck. Am I really meant to keep saying, 'Oh, um, sorry would you mind touching me for a few minutes?' I have never once come before the guy and assumed we were done. Have I just been unlucky?"

The responses to this post indicate that, as a gender, well, we've been pretty unlucky. "I can count on one hand the amount of guys who cared about my orgasm," one user replied. "It's frustrating to feel like a man's orgasm is more important just because a woman's may take longer," added another. "I don't think I've ever had a male partner offer to finish me after he has gotten his – what an infuriating double standard," concluded a third.

You only have to look at the census data from the most recent Sex In Australia survey to begin to comprehend the extent of our raw deal. Of the 20,094 people who were surveyed, 92 per cent of men had an orgasm during their last sexual encounter compared to only 66 per cent of women.

Dr Paul Joannides, research psychoanalyst and board member of the Journal of Sexual Medicine (guidetogettingiton.com), traces the whole him-first mentality back to two decades worth of sex ed that focuses on female abstinence, "teaching women to feel shame about their bodies and for having sex drives". Simply tell a woman that sex can lead to unwanted pregnancy or a damaged reputation, and our formative experience of sex is that there's little room for women who enjoy it.

"It's called gendered sexual positioning and it's still there, those messages that women can be too sexual, too knowledgeable and too sexually experienced, and then they're sluts – that's the kind of terminology people use," says clinical sexologist Naomi Hutchings (adelaidesexology.com.au). "I hear, 'I can't masturbate, that's gross. I can't look at my vulva.' Some of my work as a therapist is telling people to go and look at the *Labia Library* online (labialibrary.org.au) to build body confidence."

Are we perpetuating stereotypes?

Hutchings noticed something particularly interesting when she looked at the role of who initiates sex – traditionally a male area – within lesbian couples. Where the women had grown up heterosexual and had previously dated men, she found that they often fell into the pattern of wanting and believing that a male should initiate sex. And the surprising result? "Neither one initiates," she explains. ♦





However, it's a different story if the couple had no exposure to male-biased gender stereotypes. "Then they're just making it up as they go, which is fabulous. They say to me, 'We don't have role models, we've not seen that – so stuff gender'. They take turns to initiate so there's lots of equality."

Backing this up, a study by Yale University has found that sticking to traditional gender roles makes people less sexually comfortable. Research subjects were taken into a private room where there was a sex survey and a bowl of free female condoms. They discovered that the more someone endorsed traditional gendered power roles in their survey answers, the less sexually confident they were. On top of that, the less likely they would be to take one of the free female condoms home with them – a woman-first method of contraception.

The problem with porn...

For Dr Joannides, the issue with always letting the guy play the dominant role is that unless you like to be pleased *exactly* how he does it, then you're likely in for a bad ride. Particularly if porn is his instruction manual.

"When we use porn as our standard of how sex should be, there can be no equality," says Dr Joannides. "Most porn is catered to the way men become sexually aroused. It shows women being up for anything a guy wants, when he wants it. We now have boys in high school asking young women if they like double-penetration and facials. There's no way most women can win if porn is your model for lovemaking."

And women aren't winning. We fight to overturn Australia's 18.8 per cent gender pay gap, yet we're laying back and just letting our 26 per cent gender orgasm gap happen. In sex, women aren't only coming second; frequently, we aren't coming at all. This isn't the equivalent of being paid less, it's the equivalent of no pay at all. Of course, pleasure can always be obtained purely from taking part – as long as the rules of the between-the-sheets game aren't just written to benefit men.

"When we use porn as our standard of how sex should be, there can be no equality"

Did you see our piece on the Aussie woman reshaping the porn industry? Read it by clicking cleo.com.au

Communication is key (to orgasm)

We can call the shots. In the book *What Do Women Want? Adventures In The Science Of Female Desire*, author Daniel Bergner looked at human and animal research, and concluded that women also want sex as much as men do – and not just for emotional security.

Back in April, a study in *Archives Of Sexual Behaviour* uncovered that when you remove the slut-shaming stigma, women are just as open to opportunities to engage in casual sex as their male counterparts. On the flip side, while men commonly report having more sexual partners than women, if you ask for a woman's 'number' while she's connected to a lie-detector test, research has shown that she will actually lower the amount to keep up with social norms.

This is a lesson in listening to our voices – men's loud bragging, women's self-conscious whispers – and identifying that our own mouths are dictating our sexual rights. Imagine what would happen if we altered the sound balance?

Within a sexual relationship, that means levelling out the power from one set of genitals to another. "Feedback and communication are a massively important part of sexual pleasure because each woman is different," explains Dr Joannides. "There should be an acceptance that partners discuss what feels good and what doesn't."

Today, Hutchings is using her knowledge and voice to educate the next generation of young people on the importance of female pleasure. "Even when I speak to primary school children, I use the word orgasm. Maybe one line, casually, in the middle of my talk, but I'll say, if you touch or press this area and there is a sensation, that's an orgasm. I think, why not? There are pictures of babies in-utero touching themselves. Boys have wet dreams. Why aren't we telling girls that they have orgasms? Because they do."

But when a third more Australian men than women admit to masturbating, what are we telling the world about our right to having one? 🍆

"Sex is only as good as your communication. If you need encouragement, ask them to be more vocal about what they like about you. It was a game-changer for me when my partner started saying how beautiful he found my body while we were having sex, or that he loves what I'm doing. That's when I really started feeling confident!"
Tori, 29

"Tell a guy what action he can do to help pleasure you. Men need to take action to fix something. Direct him." Mel, 30

"It's a positive if they want to try something new in bed."
Amanda, 26

"Sex isn't about who has the most impressive body – it's about seduction, fantasy and respect. It doesn't matter if you have a small penis or small boobs, or have other characteristics that might not be conventionally attractive." Robyn, 24

"Don't be embarrassed about masturbating. My female friends denied masturbating, even when I was open that I did. They all later admitted they were lying."
Jenni, 24

How you conquered self-doubt in the sack

"The things that make you feel confident during sex are the same things that make you feel more confident in life. Take care of yourself, dress in outfits that make you feel good, get to know your naked body, engage in positive self-talk, be kind to yourself!"
Susie, 25

"Sex with someone new can be scary, intimidating and awkward. Try to relax enough to let it be fun." Louisa, 32

"Focus on what gives you pleasure. If you feel good, you're more relaxed and confident. I don't mean pleasure yourself and forget about the other person, but make everything you do to them something you enjoy. Replace, 'Am I doing this right?' with 'Stroking your back feels good!'" Anya, 24

"Women worry about how to initiate sex. I just say to my partner, 'Hey honey, let's have sex.'"
Sara, 33

"Give your self-confidence time to build when you're having sex with someone new. It's totally OK if you're not exactly the best version of yourself to start off with. The very first time I had an orgasm during sex with my now-boyfriend, I was really awkward and shy. The next time I felt much better, and now I love it!" Lydia, 21



$\frac{1}{3}$ more
Australian men
than women
admit to masturbating...
what are we telling the world
about our right to an
orgasm?