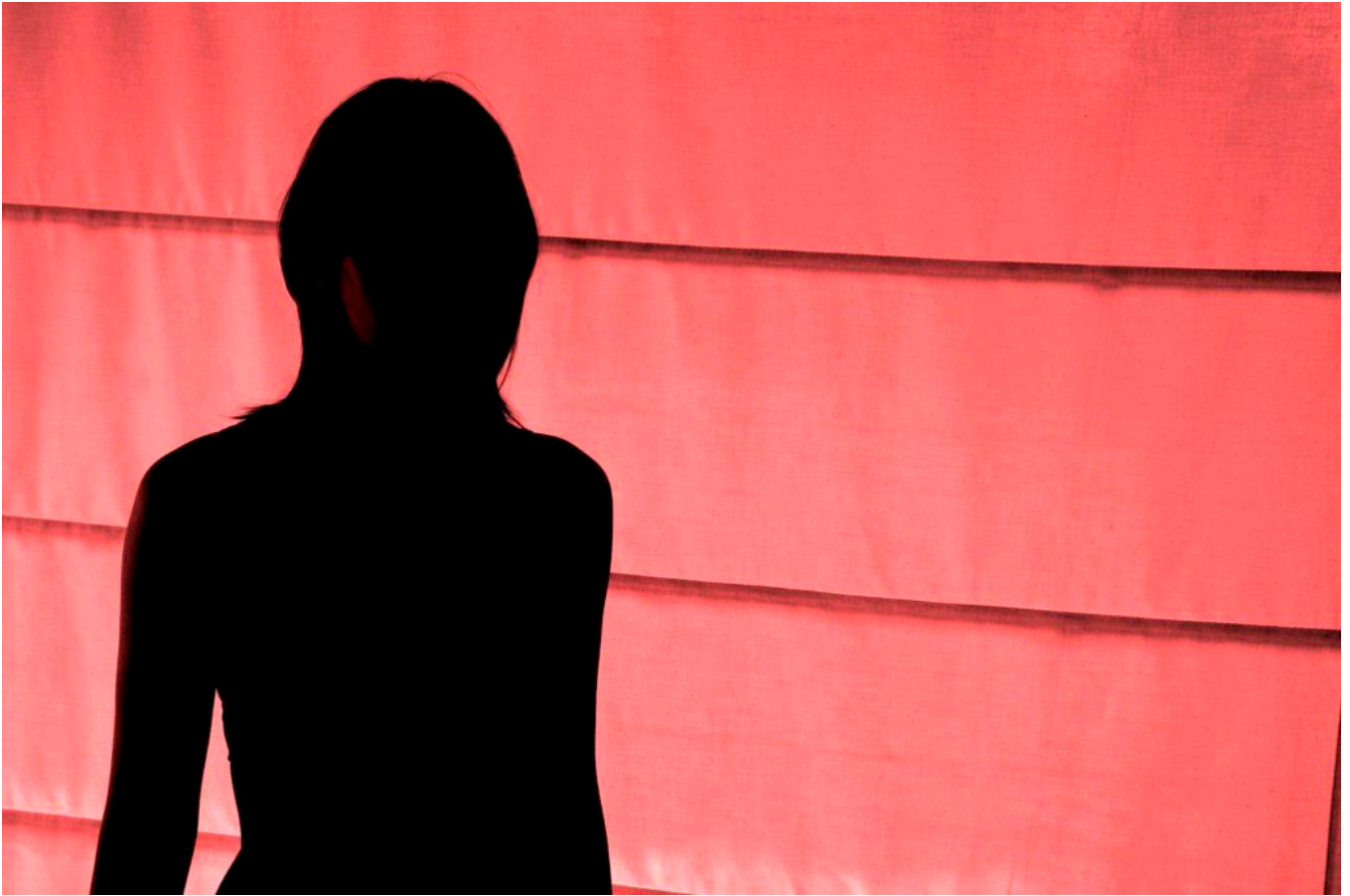


# Women and Sex: We've Been Measuring the Wrong Things

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Perceived gender differences in sexuality, such as the belief that men have more sexual partners or desire than women, have gained considerable attention in the scientific community and with the public in general. But what if these disparities stem from differences in how women and men experience sex—that is, the quality of the sex they get? Terri D. Conley and Verena Klein, from the University of Michigan, analyzed this possibility in an article in [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#).

Conley and Klein posited that women experience a different version of sex than men do—and not solely with respect to sexual intercourse or arousal. “Instead, ‘sexuality’ refers to the totality of how women and men experience their sexual selves—that is, the cultural experience of sexuality, from birth onward—the sexual environment that all humans inhabit,” Conley and Klein explained. By this definition, sexuality encompasses how people are perceived as sexual beings as well as how they learn about sex (from school, peers, family, and media) and physically and psychologically explore desire and pleasure.

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Using this definition of sexuality, Conley and Klein argue that to understand gender differences in sexuality, researchers must think deeply about the context in which women and men experience it. This differs from the common framing of “sex” as a gender-neutral concept for which women have less affinity. Failure to consider the factors that affect what “sex” is for each gender can cloud the conclusions often drawn from research on gender differences in sexuality. “What we as a society call ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality’—is different for women and men, rendering comparisons on this dimension faulty,” the researchers wrote. With this premise, they reanalyzed a primary stereotype about gender and sex: women’s relatively lower interest.

## Barriers to sex enjoyment

The widespread belief that women express less interest in sex, seek out less sex, masturbate less, and respond less favorably to sex than men is a highly gendered interpretation of sexuality, Conley and Klein argue. The differences between men and women in these areas are actually very small in practical terms, though some differences appear in research (e.g., in reactions to casual sex). The researchers analyzed four dimensions of differences between men and women that might contribute to women experiencing lower quality sex and, therefore, appearing less sexual.

**Anatomical differences:** Genital differences—women’s clitorises are less visible than men’s penises—make girls less likely to touch their clitorises whereas boys routinely touch their penises. As a result, boys become more familiar with their own genitals than women do. In addition, sexual pain is more likely to affect women than men, and the fact that only women can get pregnant makes an unplanned pregnancy more onerous for women than men. The interaction of these anatomical differences with societal norms and structures amplifies the role they might play in women’s sexual interest.

**Gender disparities in experiences of sexual violence:** Women are more likely than men to associate sex with violence or mistreatment (1 in 5 women, compared with 1 in 71 men, will be sexually assaulted at some point; Black et al., 2011). People who have learned to associate sex with violence are more likely to manifest lack of desire and disinterest in sex, which may explain why heterosexual women are less likely to accept offers of casual sex than men.

**Inequitably applied stigma for sex:** Girls receive negative sexual messages far more often than boys (e.g., when speaking to girls about sex, parents might focus more on its risks, such as unplanned pregnancies, than on its benefits). Women also face sexual double standards in that they are judged more harshly than men for having a high number of sexual partners or engaging in a variety of sexual activities. The threat of stigma can deter people from engaging in stigmatized behaviors; thus, sexual stigma may dampen women’s interest in sex.

**Masculine cultures of heterosexuality:** This difference applies primarily to heterosexual women and focuses on aspects of heterosexual encounters that prioritize men’s pleasure over women’s. For instance, the centrality of men’s orgasms and the tendency to prioritize penile–vaginal intercourse over other practices that could increase women’s pleasure, as well as a lack of communication during sex,

appear to contribute to prevent women from enjoying sex more.

## **Implications for research on gender differences in sexuality**

These disparities in how women and men learn about and experience sex, and the social norms their sexuality is subjected to, can shed new light on common gender differences in sexuality. Many of the disparities appear interconnected (e.g., anatomical differences can inform orgasm differences), suggesting that future research could examine the factors that independently influence gender differences as well as those that are interconnected. Conley and Klein also proposed that considering multiple sexual and gender identities can help to illuminate whether gender sexual differences result from anatomy, socialization, partner's gender, or other variables.

Moreover, the differences in what women and men get out of “sex” point to a fundamental methodological concern regarding psychological research on group differences: “If researchers wish to make claims about differences between groups, they should go to great pains to ensure that the groups are having as close as the same experience as possible ... This is not a difference of being ‘sociocultural’ or ‘inherent’ or the politics that surround that debate—it is a matter of research methods,” Conley and Klein concluded.

## **Related Research**

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## Gender and Bias

Researchers explore the factors that perpetuate gender inequality and the effects that such bias can have on women in the workplace and beyond.

**Feedback on this article? Email [apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org](mailto:apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org) or comment below.**

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