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The Orgasm Gap: The Real Reason Women Get Off Less Often Than Men and How to Fix It

By [Lisa Wade](#) ^[1] / [AlterNet](#) ^[2]
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According to a large-scale survey of American adults, women have about one orgasm for every three ^[3] a man enjoys. We call this the "orgasm gap" and it's been a point of contention since feminists identified it during the heyday of the sexual revolution.

In the U.S. we tend to explain the orgasm gap by suggesting that women's bodies are somehow bad at orgasms. Sigmund Freud famously posited that women should have orgasms in response to intercourse. If they didn't, he argued, there was something fundamentally wrong with their sexuality. While his theory has been roundly debunked (as few as 25% of women will routinely have orgasms from intercourse), many female college students who don't have orgasms this way assume there is something wrong with their sexual response. College students bring some other interesting ideas too. 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, anatomically speaking, women are unlikely to orgasm from anal sex. I've clarified the location of the clitoris (30% of women and 25% of men don't know where it is ^[4]).

These are the stories we tell ourselves about the clitoris: that women's bodies are simply more difficult. The clitoris is hard to find and complicated to operate; it's shy and persnickety; it disappoints its owner and mocks the efforts of her partner. And perhaps it doesn't matter anyway, we continue, because women aren't as interested in orgasm, right? They don't need them like men do. They're a more giving sex. Their pleasure is more diffuse and empathic. In any case, they're really in it for the eye contact and the cuddling.

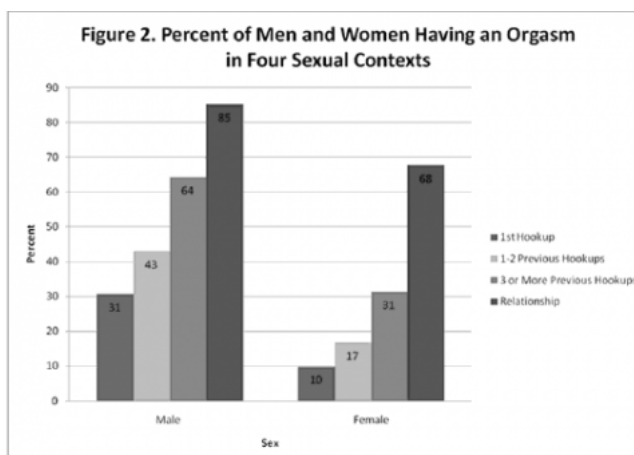
Freudian echoes, anatomical mischaracterizations and gender stereotypes are part of the logic naturalizing the orgasm gap, but there is nothing natural about it. We know this because women who sleep with women have many more orgasms ^[5] than heterosexual women, almost as many as men who sleep with women. Women also have no problem experiencing orgasm through masturbation ^[6] and the same women who frequently have orgasms during masturbation report many fewer orgasms when they're with a partner ^[6]. Men are also not faster to climax than women; it takes women the same amount of time to orgasm during masturbation as it takes men, on average, to have an orgasm through intercourse: four minutes ^[7].

Instead of being driven by biology, women's rate of orgasm relative to men is a function of social forces. For one, we often bifurcate the sexual experience in line with gender norms: men are sexual (they experience desire) and women are sexy (they inspire desire). The focus on men's internal wants and sensations also draws our attention to his satisfaction. Thus his orgasm, but not necessarily hers, becomes a critical part of what must happen for a sexual encounter to be successful and fulfilling. This is part of why intercourse – a sexual act that is strongly correlated with orgasm for men – is the only act that almost everyone agrees counts as "real sex," whereas activities that are more likely to produce orgasm in women are considered optional foreplay.

Meanwhile, the idea that women's primary goal in sex is to deliver a sexy body can focus her attention on how she looks instead of how she feels. This can lead to spectating, being worried about how she looks from her partner's perspective, which decreases the chance a woman will have an orgasm. It can also lead to active avoidance of orgasm because of worries her face or body might do something unattractive.

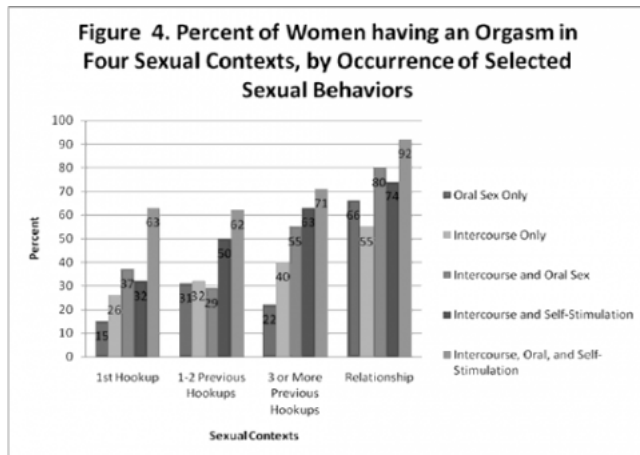
Some new data reveal just how context dependent rates of orgasm really are. Sociologist [Elizabeth Armstrong](#) ^[8] and colleagues analyzed quantitative data ^[9] on the likelihood of orgasm among about 15,000 heterosexual college students. The graph below shows the likelihood that men and women will orgasm in first "hookups" (a casual sexual encounter with a friend, stranger, or acquaintance), higher order hook ups (the second or third and four or more), and relationships.

The far left bar in both sets shows that the orgasm gap between men and women the first time they become sexual with one another reflects the national average: women have one for every three men have. But the chance that either will have an orgasm increases when they hook up a second time, and a third, and so on. And the orgasm gap shrinks too: from 3.10 for every one of hers in first time hook ups, to 2.53:1 in second and third hookups, to 2.06:1 in fourth and further hookups, to 1.25:1 in relationships. Women in relationships, then, are having almost seven times as many orgasms as women hooking up for the first time and the orgasm gap has shrunk by more than half.



But that's even not the really fantastic data.

The next graph, looking only at women now, adds another variable: whether the sexual encounter included three different activities: oral sex performed on the female partner, intercourse, or female self-clitoral stimulation. The wide range in the data -- from a 15% chance of orgasm on the far left to a 92% chance on the far right -- is what is truly stunning. Both additional hookups and additional activities tend to increase her rate of orgasm. When couples in relationships engaged in all three activities, women's rates of orgasm become nearly universal and almost converge with men's. Men in that situation have an orgasm 96% of the time, so the orgasm gap has shrunk to 1.04:1.



Elizabeth Armstrong and her colleagues conclude that women's orgasm rates are strongly related to her evolving relationship with her partner, the activities they include, and his investment in her pleasure. [Qualitative research](#) ^[10] on men's motivations confirm the last piece. "I'm all about making her orgasm," said a man interviewed for their study. "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."

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."

Expecting an orgasm from a male hookup partner is even seen as demanding and 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 don't know. 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."

Out of nerves, insecurity, or a lack of entitlement, women often prioritize men's pleasure too. Speaking of hookups, one woman insists: "I will do everything in my power to, like whoever I'm with, to get [him] off." [My own research](#) ^[11] confirms that college women often fully accept that hookups usually don't include orgasms for women. "Even if I was in charge," said one, "I did not make sure I was being pleased." "The guy kind of expects to get off," said another, "while the girl doesn't expect anything."

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. I know that he wants me to orgasm. I know that, and like just me knowing that we are connected and like we're going for the same thing and that like he cares."

In sum, it's high time we stop pretending that women are just bad at orgasms. The gap between men's and women's frequency of orgasm is strongly impacted by social forces that privilege men's pleasure over women's. Both men and women tend to buy into these messages, naturalizing and justifying the orgasm gap.

While college students reproduce these dynamics, there is also much room for optimism. The size of the orgasm gap between men and women in relationships is much smaller than that in the population overall. This is promising. And, while we should push back against the idea that hookups are opportunities for women to sexually service their male peers, the fact that men are showing concern for the pleasure of their girlfriends is a step in the right direction. The feminists of the sexual revolution are likely disappointed that it's taking this long, and that we still see a version of the Madonna/whore-now-hookup/girlfriend dichotomy, but there is some indication that women's pleasure is on the agenda and the orgasm gap is shrinking.

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[6] <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2008/01/17/knowledge-about-the-clitoris-and-orgasm-for-women/>

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[10] <http://asr.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/04/19/0003122412445802.abstract>

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[13] <http://departments.oxy.edu/sociology/faculty.htm#wade>

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