

The orgasm gap and why women climax less than men

Sex isn't just about penetration

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Women have fewer orgasms than men. But this gap is cultural, not biological. Closing it is possible, both on a societal and personal level.

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Imagine a steamy sex scene involving a woman and a man from your favourite television show or movie. It's likely that both parties orgasm. But this doesn't reflect reality.

Because during heterosexual sexual encounters, women have far fewer orgasms than men. This is called the orgasm gap. And it has been documented in the [scientific literature](#) for more than 20 years.

In one [study](#) of more than 50,000 people, 95% of heterosexual men said they usually or always orgasm when sexually intimate, while only 65% of heterosexual women said the same.

[Research](#) shows that some people believe this gap is because women's orgasms are biologically elusive. Yet, if this were true, women's orgasm rates would not differ depending on circumstance. Indeed, [many studies](#) show that women orgasm more when alone than with a partner.

At least 92% of women orgasm when pleasuring themselves. Women also orgasm more when having sex in relationships compared with casual sex. In a [study](#) of more than 12,000 college students, only 10% of the women said they orgasm during first-time hookups while 68% said they orgasm during sex that occurs in a committed relationship.

Women also [orgasm more](#) when having sex with other women. In one [study](#) 64% of bisexual women said that they usually or always orgasm when being sexually intimate with other women.

Why does this happen?

In all these scenarios where women are climaxing more, there is a greater focus on [clitoral stimulation](#). The majority of women need clitoral stimulation to orgasm – which makes sense given that the clitoris and the penis originate from the same kind of tissue. And both the clitoris and the penis are chock full of touch-sensitive nerve endings and erectile tissue.

In [my work](#), I've asked thousands of women: "What is your most reliable route to orgasm?" Only 4%

say penetration. The other 96% say clitoral stimulation, alone or paired with penetration.

The main reason for the orgasm gap, then, is that women are not getting the clitoral stimulation they need. And cultural messages about the supremacy of intercourse feed into this. Indeed, countless films, [TV shows](#), books and plays portray women [orgasming from intercourse alone](#).

Popular men's [magazines](#) also give advice on intercourse positions to bring women to orgasm. And while some of the positions do include clitoral stimulation, the message is still that intercourse is the central and most important sexual act.

Photo: Women are much more likely to orgasm from same-sex encounters.

The language used in these articles – and in the culture as a whole – reflects and perpetuates this overvaluing of intercourse. We use the words “sex” and “intercourse” as if they are the same. We relegate the clitoral stimulation that comes before intercourse as “foreplay”, implying it is a lesser form of sex.

[Multiple studies](#) have demonstrated that such messages give the idea that sex should proceed as follows: foreplay (just to get the woman ready for intercourse), intercourse, male orgasm and sex over. In this version of sex, it's the man's job to “give” a woman an orgasm by lasting a long time and thrusting hard.

No wonder [research](#) finds that men feel more masculine when their partner orgasms during intercourse. And, it's no surprise that [women fake orgasms, primarily during intercourse, to protect their partner's egos](#).

Indeed, studies suggest that between [53%](#) to [85%](#) of women admit to faking an orgasm. Some [research](#) indicates that the majority of women have faked at least once in their lifetime.

Closing the gap

There is hope though, because given that cultural factors are responsible for the orgasm gap, changing how we view sex and intercourse will help to improve women's sexual experiences. Indeed, [educating](#) people on the fact that women don't have a [limited biological capacity for orgasm](#) is important. Likewise, education for both men and women about the clitoris could be a game-changer.

Still, such knowledge alone is unlikely to close the orgasm gap on a personal level. According to a chapter in a [sex therapy textbook](#), women need skills to put this knowledge into practice. This means women must be encouraged to masturbate to learn what they want sexually. And this needs to be coupled with training in communication so they can share this information with partners.

Women need to feel entitled to pleasure and empowered to get the same type of stimulation alone as with a partner. This means heterosexual couples' must rid themselves of the old script that calls for foreplay followed by intercourse after which sex is over.

Instead, they can take turns having orgasms using oral sex or manual stimulation where she orgasms followed by intercourse. Alternatively, women can touch themselves with hands or a vibrator during intercourse.

[Research](#) shows that women who use vibrators have more orgasms. And because many women worry about how they look during sex or if they are pleasing their partner, [research](#) shows that mindfulness can help, too.

Photo: "Vibrators and sex toys on pink background." Women are more likely to experience orgasms when using a vibrator. Pexels/anna shvets

But orgasm equality is about so much more than quality sex. Multiple women have told me that once they felt empowered in the bedroom, they were more confident in the rest of their life.

Importantly, according to [one study](#), feeling entitled to pleasure increases a woman's agency in telling partners what they want sexually and their agency in protecting themselves sexually.

Indeed, the study found that feeling entitled to sexual pleasure increased women's confidence in both refusing to do sexual acts they were not comfortable with and using protection against both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

According to another [article](#) on sex education and pleasure by two US health researchers, when young people learn that sex should be pleasurable, they may be less likely to use it in manipulative and harmful ways. So teaching that sex is about pleasure for both partners, rather than something done to women for men's pleasure, might also help to decrease levels of sexual violence.

Clearly, teaching about women's pleasure will do more than increase orgasm rates.
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P.S.

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Dr. Laurie Mintz is a feminist author, therapist, emeritus professor, and speaker whose life's work has been committed to helping people live more authentic, meaningful, and joyful lives through the art and science of psychology. While both a tenured Professor, and now and Emeritus Professor at the University of Florida, Dr. Mintz teaches the Psychology of Human Sexuality to hundreds of undergraduate students each year. Mintz has published over 50 research articles in academic journals and six chapters in academic books. She has received numerous professional and teaching awards. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, indicating that her work has had a positive national influence on the field of psychology. She is the author of two popular press books—both written with the aim of empowering women sexually: *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters and How to Get it* (HarperOne, 2017) and *A Tired Woman's Guide to Passionate Sex: Reclaim Your Desire and Reignite Your Relationship* (Adams Media, 2009). *Becoming Cliterate* has received national awards and international acclaim, earning Mintz a spot on Forbes "50 over 50" list of women innovators.



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