

Terms of Contact and Touching Change: Investigating Pleasure in an HIV Epidemic

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sex ... to be desired/to desire/to want someone
to desire, to feel desired ...

to come to pleasure/to be brought to pleasure/to
bring to pleasure ...

bodies in motion, people touching each other ...

1 Introduction

Factual information, dire data and warnings and what *not* to do are often all that people hear about sex. There is little in all of this to anchor sexual connections in real situations and real bodies. For many people, pleasure – or concerns and fears about its absence – is part of what they hope to experience when they have sex. So, exploring issues of pleasure is a critically important part of discussions about safer sex. But talking about pleasure means more than just reeling off facts about pleasure zones and sexual acts. It calls for addressing deep-seated cultural norms, taken-for-granted ideas about how the body works, and assumptions about what it means to be a ‘real man’ or ‘real woman’. It also calls for contextualising the ways in which women and men talk about, negotiate and have sex in different settings, and in relation to the negotiations and power relations that characterise their everyday lives and intimate relationships.

Western-led commercialisation of ‘techniques’ and the mechanics of satisfaction, and profit-driven media narratives of the quest for personal pleasure, are riddled with problems when set on a wider international and cross-cultural map, let alone within Western societies themselves. In Soweto, with over 80 per cent unemployment, harsh daily conditions of poverty, one in four or more infected with HIV and research showing violence widely normalised in sex

with women, television has arrived with Westernised advertising images of sexualised glamour, stereotypes of desirable bodies and a sex-rich formula as the main ‘hold’ for soaps, films and advertising. In the dry dust of sparse survival among thousands and thousands of barrack-like, apartheid-era dwellings, the good life is imaged with sexy models and scenarios of affluence, where Viagra billboards loom beside those of Marlboro. In impoverished, post-Soviet Tallinn in Estonia, 15-year-old teenagers reeled off the porn sites they frequented, insisted on setting role play workshops in a longed-for San Francisco world and dreamed of the *Pretty Woman* film’s ‘way out’, i.e. via sex work, to love and wealth with the unknown Westerner. The free market promises a certain kind of pleasure, with a curious yet insistent absence of sexual risk or sexual safety.

Pleasure is inherently ambivalent. Working with pleasure, but also in ways that bring into question embodied gender prejudices and inequalities, is challenging. But it is also crucially important. In this article, we explore how and why pleasure matters for efforts to tackle the spread of HIV and the effects of the AIDS epidemic on social and sexual relations.

2 Sexual contexts

Context shapes sexualities and sexual encounters; attitudes and images of sexual behaviour are shaped by social conditions, producing self-perceptions that affect people’s confidence, their perception of their own desirability, their gender and sexual sense of self, and the way they perceive the agendas of the opposite sex, the sexual agency they feel appropriate, their hopes and their despair. The terrain of sexual experience is permeated by all the other social and human factors that frame the specific encounter

where bodies meet. Emotional dynamics around the physicality of sex are affected by the situation people are coming from, the terms of living (or dying) they are navigating, the affirmation of caring or re-enactment of control or abuse, and the relationship that they are in; this in turn is affected by and affects the economics of everyday life.

Pleasure itself can be defined in different ways. If your children or grandparents are starving or ill, if you are unemployed or poor, if you are in a conflict zone far from home, then a paid sexual encounter could be joyful not because of actual physical or emotional satisfaction, but because you are accessing possibilities of affirmation. If the sex is consolidating the support you need to give you and your children respect in a community, the pleasure can be in the confirmation of the pact. If you are far from home in a risky conflict situation, far from the intimacies of family or community, living in discomfort, facing the unknowns of danger, injury or death, under pressure to keep up a 'front' in mostly male company, then the pleasure of sex with a local woman, enabled by financial exchange, may not be just about orgasm, but involve a whole range of reassurances and comfort. If you live in a civil war, with collapsed social infrastructure, widespread abject poverty and minimal family resources and violence in the home, your sexual experience with the older sugar daddy (who is enabling your only possible access to education, as a girl) may also be the kindest, most pleasuring relation you have. If the necessity of work or trading take you away from home, boredom, loneliness and curiosity can draw you into private exploratory pleasures not necessarily condoned back home. If you live in a community scarred by HIV and AIDS, the greatest pleasure may be gained by knowing *how* your exploring sexual pleasure has absolutely no chance of getting you infected, or infecting your partner.

The diversity of reasons why people actually 'have sex' or imagine others having sex surfaces in our workshops in marvellous variety. Satisfaction and pleasure are named by participants everywhere as a key reason for sexual relations. But the list of reasons often expands wildly. In contexts as diverse as the Congo or Azerbaijan, Liberia or Georgia, people have sex because, participants have suggested:

– out of a 'natural need'; marital duty or fear of abandonment; due to the need to perform and prove yourself; because you have no choice;

business; education funding; fear of violence; self-esteem boosting; boredom; kindness and generosity; pity; fear that the man's balls will burst or he will go mad; worn down by constant demand; to be allowed to sleep; to have children; to feel powerful; for exercise; self-affirmation; love; fear of coercion; for revenge; because there are electricity cuts at night; to gain experience; to get work or power; to lose weight; as proof of commitment; to prove trust; for cheap or no-cost enjoyment; to live up to peer pressure; to de-stress and relax the body; to prove you are a real man; because you cannot sleep; to reduce tension in the home; to share intimacy; to get support from your partner; from fear of threats if you resist; for fun; for no reason at all; to keep healthy; out of fear of loneliness; to forward your career; to get good grades; to make someone else angry; because of poverty; as a bet; to feel young; to get what you cannot get at home; to feel powerful; out of a long friendship; to get pregnant; to gain stature or prestige; just because it feels good ...

And so the list goes on. Presumably the possibility and nature of 'pleasure' is utterly different in all these situations; equally, the very terms of sexual safety are affected and modified by these very situations and motivations.

3 Learning about pleasure

Every culture offers maps for learning ways to understand and express desire and ways to project onto or interpret the sexual desire and actions of the other sex. In all cultures, the institution of marriage itself, with the patriarchal and religious traditions, discourses and regulations from which it has evolved, plays a key role in the mapping, categorising and often disallowing of pleasure. Ideas about what a 'real' woman or man should want or do are rife in all cultures, and affect perceptions of what the opposite sex wants or needs – often in ways that are unhelpful, misleading and unsafe. Unquestioned, taken-for-granted gender systems hold in place ignorance of the body; they create silences between men and women about sexual desire and practice or collaboration in creating pleasure. What individual men or women think of as sexual knowledge is often comprised of a mosaic of half-truths, fragmented information, myths and beliefs, punctuated with doubt and hesitations. These have a huge impact on the possibilities of pleasure, as indeed on the possibilities of condom use or non-penetrative sex.

Notions of sexual pleasure are laced with these half-truths and beliefs. Ancient myths and traditions in Northern Norway gave central importance to women's sexual pleasure, with stories of younger partners receiving active instruction from older women. In parts of Zambia the traditional initiation processes for girls take them through demanding, explicit and required learning about exactly what to do sexually with men. The training, run by older women, involves practising rhythmic gyrations with the bodies of other girls, and disciplinary action for getting the movements wrong or lacking enthusiasm. How is sexual pleasure for men and for women being imagined and sought in this context? And what are the men, on their side, learning to do? Women in Sierra Leone from cultural and social contexts that still enact female circumcision, were, in workshops, full of innuendos and laughter about the pleasures of sex – so what can be learned from *their* map of sexual pleasure? How do US teenagers taking the silver ring, abstinence-until-marriage pledges backed by the Bush administration's abstinence agenda, in which any discussion of actual sexual practices let alone pleasure are silenced, understand sexual pleasure? Or binge-drinking teenagers in the UK today?

The truth of the matter is that you experience pleasure according to what you have heard about it and according to the particular situation within which you seek or achieve – or bluff – it. In workshops involving teacher trainers, ministry representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and school principals in Monrovia, Liberia, the men were unanimous in putting sexual pleasure central to the reasons why people have sex. The pleasure idea was wedded to the idea of climax and release, ejaculation and orgasm. But for them, men's wish for pleasure, many said, also involved women's sexual pleasure (the women watched silently as this was claimed). But when asked when or how does a woman have pleasure, the only explanation offered and agreed on by the men, was: when the man's juices meet the women's juices, she climaxes. While the women shook their heads and laughed (and the HIV prevention educator digested the implications of this 'common knowledge'), discussion opened up about women not having orgasms more often (and faking it). Interest surfaced in more diffuse forms of pleasure through intimacy, not just penetration, as well as the wider curiosity in the group to understand better the ways in which men's and women's bodies work.

It is exactly this kind of talk, and the openness associated with it, that conservative religious forces seek to silence. What percentage of sexual interactions between partners in a lifetime is motivated by the reproductive necessity that religions put centre stage in the marriage pact? Can the abstinence/fidelity pattern meet more creatively the ideas of sexual pleasure? Or do certain religious frameworks need to deny rights to sexual pleasure and regulate all sexual possibilities since the meeting of sexual desires, the embodiment of sexual pleasure and satisfaction is not part of the religious, moral, spiritual framework? What alternative, affirming, understandings of sexuality are possible within Christian frameworks? These questions need to be explored more clearly by both those engaged in religious practices and sexual health HIV prevention workers – and not antagonistically, where possible, but with the aims of real interventions in sexual safety and the real urgency of stemming HIV.

From another angle, public norms of marriage and the family coexist often with social banter about sex and flirtation that belie the pressures that work against the very pleasures that the daily banter invokes. Under jokes and media liberalism, innuendoes, rumours and myths, lie a plethora of taboos, silences, insecurities, anxieties and policed reputations within youth and adult peer groups. Pressures on sexual behaviours – to do or not do certain things – take all kinds of forms. In the West, there is a taboo in the dominant culture around *not* desiring or liking to engage in sex or wanting to get married. In some cultures a man abusing a woman with violence is understood as a key part of 'loving' and wanting her. There are prescriptions around 'doing it right', and there can be punishments for not adhering to the rules.

The challenge facing us in sexual health and safety work is that the understanding, anticipation and thus enactment of pleasure is crucially affected by people's sense of self 'as a woman' or 'as a man'. Sexual norms assign different license, powers, possibilities and constraints for men and for women, positioning men and women in certain ways in relation to sexual interactions. And while there are distinctive similarities across cultures, there are important differences. Imposing Western norms on non-Western cultures not only misses the mark, it may make discussing – and changing – mores and practices that *do* make a difference to sexual safety and pleasure more difficult.

4 Sexual rights and pleasure

The notion of 'sexual rights' raises interesting challenges in relation to sexual pleasure. Equal rights regarding sexuality can be seen as crucial to establishing conditions for equal access to sexual pleasure. Discussions on sexual rights migrate into two directions, both of which skew the issue. The first involves placing priority on women's right to say 'no', to set limits on what is unnamed, but somehow assumed to be an inevitable male agenda of demands or 'needs'. So for women it is about the right *not* to be sexual unless fully wanting it, holding men in abeyance. But this means that the sexual rights debate does often represent women's sexuality as restrictive and limiting – if not *limited* – in contrast to the assumption of men's 'natural' urges. At an AIDSnett meeting on gender and HIV in Oslo, an Ethiopian man participant asked the haunting question: 'But what are *men's* sexual rights?' It was a question unanswered by the women-centred, traditional gender-equality, development work participants. Yet the question begged a crucial issue about not only how women's diverse sexual desires are understood (and engaged with) but also how men's bodies and desires are understood; about what is understood to be normal if not necessary for men, and about ways boys and men learn to conceptualise pleasure and to interpret and enact their bodies.

Whether in England or Burundi, Norway or Zambia, it is often an essentialist biological discourse about male sexuality that is invoked as a given truth – but never examined in detail. 'We all know what men want/need' often feeds an unspoken undertow of assumptions. And this often locks men in the relentless but necessary quest for penetration of women – with the downside being that if you do not do this, do not seek this out, do not situate yourself socially with some kind of proof that you do this, do not go along with the boys' banter that reproduces this assumption, you may not be a 'real man'. And your pleasure depends on you doing this. So does a man have a right to have his sexual needs met and his pleasure satisfied? And if so, how are these sexual needs and pleasure understood? What shapes them and compels them to be expressed in certain ways and not in others? Are commonly held and unquestioned notions of male sexual pleasure anchored in legitimating performance of a masculinity that is in fact predicated on male power, control and naturalised gender inequality – and a performance that in fact limits notions of male sexual pleasure into very narrowly channelled acts?

The other way that sexual rights discourse is often invoked is to affirm women's rights to have sexual pleasure. This speaks to the fact that men's rights to achieve sexual pleasure on their own terms has often prevailed over the neglect or devaluing of women's sexual pleasure. Sexual conventions are often shadowed by silence, taboos and rituals of behaviour that occur without sustained building of intimacy. In a workshop on HIV prevention with male immigrants from Ethiopia and Somalia, the men were deeply interested and engaged in learning very clearly how, where and why the virus circulates, and engaged with the white female facilitators for hours with debate and questions. But at the end, there was a shared lament between them that it felt impossible to open up these discussions with their wives, since cultural taboos on seeing or speaking about the body felt so immutable. Maybe it all just needs more time; after all, effective sexual health and well-being processes always need longer time than administrations and funding envisage. In contrast, male security guards, drivers, administrators and teacher trainers in conflict-ridden areas around Goma, Congo and Gulu, Uganda and from different internally displaced persons (IDP) regions in Georgia, reported with joy how the gender-focused HIV awareness workshops had in fact generated hours of utterly new levels of dialogue between husbands and wives, parents and children.

The question of sexual rights raises further issues which relate to the institution in which sex and sexual pleasure are socially sanctioned: heterosexual marriage. Conventional marriage expectations are that sexual needs will be 'organised', and met or serviced within the marriage, the supposed lifetime pact. But what happens to 'needs' when relationships develop incompatibility or hostility, when people and situations change, when age and status, strength and confidence shift? Are sexual rights and sexual pleasures simply to be abandoned; frozen? Or is the language of 'needs to be met' and 'rights to be fulfilled' radically off key, dissociating sexual pleasure from social context and insulating it from the tides of ordinary daily lives? Does it foster the notions: she has the right to refuse, therefore I have the right to go elsewhere, or: he does not satisfy me, therefore I can look outside? How can we work constructively and compassionately with the disjuncture between sexual expectations and the contextual realities of real relations, real bodies in real life situations of survival and children to maximise the possibility of pleasure being a real and

‘sustainable’ possibility within human relationships? Or is it important to also argue that sexual pleasure needs to exist on its own terms, for its own sake, irrespective of context and relational dynamic – less as a ‘right’ than as *pleasure*, in and for itself?

5 Transforming sexual behaviour – pleasure and safety

How can we invoke the importance of pleasure in ways that are not distant or dissociated from the experiences people face in their actual, lived bodies and lives, and use this to transform sexual behaviour? As Western media globalises the neuroses of Western sex-consumerism culture, this is becoming ever more difficult. In a workshop with Muslim youth volunteer trainers in Azerbaijan, a young man made a telling comment. He said that in his grandmother’s time, women were valued for what they could do; in today’s world, women are valued (and value themselves) according to their looks. All over the world, women are increasingly driven to valuing themselves and being valued according to stereotypes of attractiveness. Slim girls in Nepal buy slimming pills from the pharmacy. Girls have transactional sex to buy the clothes and cosmetics needed to be beautiful. The sexual health narratives being exported from Western cultures are riddled with problems that risk blocking and disempowering, rather than enabling change.

Addressing pleasure in sexual safety work poses many challenges for working with the mind as well as the body – in the actual contexts people are experiencing. It involves working collaboratively to examine the assumptions that influence people’s ideas about sexual behaviour, and creating an interest and a sense of investment in seeing and acting differently that becomes part of their lives. To realise the potential power of pleasure, sexual health and HIV prevention work needs to bring alive the dynamic edges between the erotic, the experimental and the exploratory. It needs to open up compassionate conversations about the challenges and gains of dialogue, relationship, caring and empathy. It needs to open up discussion of cultural stories; to map sexuality, religious prescriptions and boundaries; the familiar, unquestioned behaviours; traditional approaches to or actual acts of sexual engagement; the realities of socially anchored options, decisions, activities and exchanges. Engaging people dynamically in becoming practitioners and activists for sexual safety calls for confronting issues

of morality in a non-judgemental way, opening up space for dialogue.

We need more cross-fertilisation of dialogue and more research about diverse cultural expectations concerning the sexual satisfaction of women. The issue of women’s pleasure is still complicated in Western cultures, despite our sex-ridden media. Female orgasm remains shrouded in elusive complexities. Recent research suggests that gendered framing of self-in-the-world is key to women claiming and implementing their own pleasure. Its unresolved inequalities and sexual divisions of labour and power haunt female satisfaction. In the realities of everyday gendered dynamics and domestic worries and tensions, whether in rural Ghana or urban Georgia, women can close down – and men, unable to navigate these domestic irresolvables, can always, it is thought, go elsewhere. This serves to reinforce the polarisations of the domestic and the erotic, where women’s sexuality can lose out in more ways than one.

Sexual safety and HIV prevention work also needs to open up discussion of how the regulation of pleasure is understood in different cultures, how people visualise it and what stories give it meaning. Take, for example, different narratives about sexual fluids in Africa. In some parts of the Congo, Rwanda and Mali, a woman’s wetness signifies her arousal and proves her pleasure. However, in parts of Zambia and South Africa, the wetness of a woman’s genital area is interpreted not as a sign of anticipated pleasure, but as a reason to not seek sexual interaction with her: as a sign of her promiscuity and her potential for carrying a sexually transmitted infection (STI). ‘Dry sex’ practices prevail, which increase HIV risk through bleeding from insertions into the vagina to dry and tighten it. Resistance to using condoms often invokes the image of liquids needing to meet to achieve ‘real’ intimacy. Teenage girls in Estonia believed condom restriction actually blocked men’s sexual satisfaction, so why would a woman who wants to please her man want to impede this mingling of fluids?

There is data in many countries showing men wanting untrammelled delivery of their sperm into women’s bodies, when they pay extra for sex workers not to use condoms. Men in the Congo claimed their delivery of sexual fluid into a woman saved them from insanity, and men in Liberia felt their ejaculation

into women's sexual fluids gave the woman an orgasm. A Finnish study showed how men facing age-associated fluctuating impotence and who were insecure about their ability to reach ejaculation inside women's bodies, cut off all intimate exchange with their partners – the fluid delivery being the *raison d'être* of intimate/pleasure exchange. The fragile edges of pride, anxiety, humiliation and rejection that haunt traditional masculinities bear sad fruit. But semen is also associated with life and growth. In The Gambia, semen absorption during pregnancy is understood to help the fetus to grow, so ejaculative climax is linked to a visualisation of life force. In a part of Papua New Guinea, oral consumption of semen of older fertile men is thought to fertilise sperm in young men.

The ways people visualise the workings of the sexual body are key in the imaginary geography of what sex is or needs to be about, of how and why pleasure needs to or can be achieved – and are thus crucial in sexual safety and HIV prevention discussions. Taking these visualisations and understandings and turning them into safer acts and behaviours that people can then begin to invest in and act out, calls for more than providing information; it requires an approach that can delve into the normative, the emotional, the biological and enable people to come up with strategies that make sense in the context of their everyday lives.

6 Building capacity for sexual health, safety and rights

If efforts to build capacity for sexual health, safety and rights are to work to mobilise prevention of HIV, then some clear, central agendas need to be developed. There is no substitute for giving people the facts about their bodies in ways that are clear, that allow them to visualise what they are learning and that make sense to them in terms of their own bodily experiences and cultural knowledge. Nor can

change happen without enabling people to explore gender traditions and reappraise their enabling or damaging dimensions. Learning processes that give people an embodied realisation of their own capacity for agency, mobilisation, assumption of responsibility and the will to communicate, are pivotal. And finally, the work has to include discussions of sex and pleasure, sex and delight, *sex as sexy*, forms of pleasing and being pleased. It needs to acknowledge that pleasure is part of why many people have sex, and that knowing what needs to happen for HIV or other STIs to pass from body to body is a crucial starting point for exploring how to create pleasure without risking infection, and the conscious cultivation of pleasure in diverse ways. To do this involves new modes of communication, responsibility, collaboration, eroticism and caring that *are* at odds with the traditional configurations of the heterosexual pact that is laden with gender inequality histories and contemporary norms.

Embracing erotic diversities has never been a component of mainstream heterosexual sexual safety or HIV training initiatives. But we need to partner greater discussion of erotic possibilities with the critical interrogations people need to develop in order to identify negative consequences of sexuality – health damage, hurt, death and injustice. We need to invent ways to stem the damage and enable relational interactions that are on the side of life: well-being, pleasure, happiness, justice, decency, collaboration, affirmation – and the exploration of desire. There is no blueprint for pleasure here. We have to hold in mind an awareness that the sexual exchanges are always within the social realities that pressure them one way or another, but are emergent from the conditions, possibilities, the (in)securities, the fears and incentives, needs and hopes that frame where people are living and what they are aspiring to.

Note

* This article was generated by a dialogue between the authors on the issues and questions that they encountered in their sexual health, rights and safety work in diverse cultural contexts over many years. It is a response to their desire to bring the authentic voices of men and women from many

different communities into the discussion on pleasure, rather than a research article. See Lewis (2002, 2003); Gordon and Cornwall (2004) and Lewis and Clift (2001) for more information on this work, and tools that others can use to facilitate their own conversations on sexuality, gender and pleasure.

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