

CHAPTER 7
ASEXUAL
AND AUTOEROTIC
WOMEN:
TWO INVISIBLE
GROUPS

Myra T. Johnson

No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof.

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The term *asexual* is rarely used in scientific literature on human sexuality. When the word is recorded, its meaning is usually left vague, with its definitions ranging from "unexpressed" sexuality to "absence of sexual desire" due to "loss of the sex glands" or to psychiatric disorder (Johnson and Belzer, 1973: p. 90; Hinsie and Campbell, 1970: p. 66). In current popular usage it often carries a pejorative connotation, as here:

The least interesting character, of course, is Joan, a kind of *asexual* coathanger on which to hang the banner of Marxist conversion. Joan's personality is not nearly so important as her manipulated goodness. (*Boston After Dark*, Feb. 25, 1975: p. 6) (Italic added)

This connotation of "manipulated goodness" is also evoked by such synonyms as *celibate*, *chaste* and *virgin*—all of which are identified, his-

torically, with religious principles. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1963), for example, includes "abstention by vow from marriage" in its definitions of *celibate*, describes a *chaste* person as "refraining from acts or even thoughts or desires that are not virginal or not sanctioned by marriage vows," and defines a *virgin* as "an unmarried woman devoted to religion."

These various definitions suggest that people are *restrained* from sexual relations with others either by physical or psychological damage or by devotion to certain religious tenets. The implication being, of course, that if it were not for these constraints, sexual interaction would occur. There appear to be few really appropriate words in the English language to describe the individual who, regardless of physical or emotional condition, actual sexual history, and marital status or ideological orientation, seems to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity. Oppressed by a consensus that they are nonexistent, these are the "unnoticed" who in this article are called "asexual"—by default.

FUNCTIONS AND OPPRESSION

The term *oppression* often suggests an unfair and discriminatory distribution of rights and resources to the observable detriment of some. Oppressiveness can also be subtle and indirect, however, the result of inequalitarian principles and dynamics insidiously molding the attitudes of societal members (Halleck, 1971: p. 22; Gil, 1973: p. 5). Women are acknowledged as constituting one of the most consistently oppressed groups in history, both directly and indirectly (Kopp, 1972: p. 33). According to the newly developing Function/Activity Theory of women's oppression, the essence of oppression lies in the assignment of certain functions as "natural" or "fitting" for women. "Child-bearer," "child-rearer," "personal servant to the male," and "sex object" are cited as among the most significant of these functions (Kearon and Mehrof, 1971: pp. 71-72). While recognizing societal oppression of asexual men,¹ the focus here is on the subtle oppression of those women who, because of asexual feelings, have avoided, refused or have not enjoyed the functions women have traditionally been obligated to perform.

1. The oppression of asexual men in contemporary American society is illustrated by Perry Deane Young's remark in *Ms Magazine* (March, 1975) that Vietnam served as an escape hatch for some men from "back home . . . where men and women were expected to move in couples." "Any sort of eccentricity (in sexual or other behavior) was tolerated in Vietnam so long as one behaved properly in combat. This allowed for those loners who wanted nothing to do with any kind of sex involving another person" (p. 116). The same sort of oppression applies to women, but combat is not usually available as a solution for them.

THE ASEXUAL WOMAN AS ASCETIC

At one point in history the woman who rejected "sex-object" and "child-bearer" functions was lauded. A theoretical concept of sexual asceticism is said to have developed among Greek thinkers who seemed to view woman as evil and inferior and who saw salvation from the flesh for her through catharsis and Platonic love.² Some scholars believe that this Greek trend preceded and influenced the position eventually adopted by early Christian groups (Bullough, 1974: pp. 107-108). The consensus among many early spokesmen of Christianity, Gnosticism, Manicheanism and similar sects seemed to be that a woman, otherwise viewed as wicked, might become more like a man, and thereby gain salvation, if she elected a life of celibacy and asceticism (Bullough, 1974: pp. 97-120).

Rather than freeing a group of women from designated female functions, this ideal of virginal womanhood seems to have assigned additional prescriptions which oppressed almost everyone. Today, many people continue to protest the centuries of negative impact this doctrine has had on vast numbers of women considered inferior for engaging in sexual relations with others:

For centuries, women have (believed) that . . . it is unforgivable for (them) to show even the slightest signs of sexual proclivity. Only in the last decade or two have women freed themselves of this irrationality. (*Glamour*, March, 1974)

The woman who may have gravitated toward this life-style because she really felt asexual also seems to have been oppressed. Her asexuality was apparently considered a religious duty. To surmount the sins of her gender, she was expected to live in poverty, fasting, meditating, seldom speaking, and in general making herself unnoticed. (Bullough, 1974: pp. 118-119)

THE ASEXUAL WOMAN AS NEUROTIC

Historical changes in dominant definitions of reality seem to have transformed the asexual woman from a self-disciplined ascetic, to be awed, to a repressed neurotic, to be "cured."

2. Pythagoras is reported to have identified women with the "unlimited principle" of "badness" and "darkness." He seemed to believe that the soul could be saved only through catharsis, which was achieved, in part, by avoiding sexual consummation. While Plato is said to have indicated in his *Timaeus* that women needed men sexually, (Bullough, 1974: pp. 60-61) he later developed the concept of Platonic love. According to this idea, happiness apparently could only be gained through "sacred," or non-physical, love (Bullough, 1974: pp. 107-108).

A young virgin suffering from acute nervousness due to repressed desires paid a visit to a highly recommended psychiatrist. The doctor took one look at the voluptuous maiden and lost all his professional objectivity. "Take off your clothes", he ordered, scarcely able to disguise the lust in his voice. "Now lie down on this couch. Now close your eyes and very slowly spell the word *bedroom*."

She began, "B—E—D—R—Oh!—Ohhhhhhhhh—Mmmmmmmmmmmmm."

She was cured. (*Playboy's Complete Book of Party Jokes*, 1972: p. 115)

Researchers of modern psychiatric literature have identified a trend to term any sexual behavior which violates traditional reproductive morality or which seems dysfunctional to the family as abnormal, disorganized or immature (Sprey, 1972: p. 88; Halleck, 1971: pp. 104-105). Redlich and Freeman's authoritative *Theory and Practice of Psychiatry* (1966), for example, labels those "patterns of sexual behavior that predominantly and habitually satisfy other sexual needs than those gratified by normal coitus" as sexual deviations or perversions (p. 384).

This psychiatric consensus oppresses not only asexual women but also all the women who avoid, or are dissatisfied with, their "naturally assigned" functions. Women who engage in pre- or extra-marital sexual relations, prostitutes, lesbian and bisexual women could all be construed as violating "reproductive, family-oriented morality." Of all these violators, however, asexual women seem to be the most invisible. Rarely conceded a unique identity by therapists, professional agreement seems to hold that really asexual women simply do not exist.

A review of the Psychological and Sociological Abstracts for the past ten years, for instance, uncovers almost no articles directly concerning women who prefer not to have sex with others. Those articles which do mention such women seem to explain their behavior in terms of "Victorianism," "premarital chastity," "religious vows" or "repressed homosexuality." The possibility that some women might freely prefer an asexual life-style is seldom examined.

THE AUTOEROTIC WOMAN

While the asexual woman, who has no sexual desires at all, is almost completely unrecognized, the autoerotic woman, who recognizes such desires but prefers to satisfy them alone, is similarly dismissed.

The construction of the nonexistence of truly autoerotic women is illustrated by a look at some of the literature on masturbation. Masturbation has been defined in Hinsie and Campbell's *Psychiatric Dictionary* as:

... psychologically normal during adolescence and to some extent even in adulthood when gratification of a physical emotional relationship with a member of the opposite sex is impossible. (Hinsie and Campbell, 1970: p. 453)

This definition not only seems to imply that masturbation is psychologically abnormal, if an adult continues to prefer it exclusively when heterosexual relations are available but it also suggests the abnormality of homosexual people. This determination of what is abnormal can be interpreted as politically powerful in terms of maintenance of conventional mores. It seems to pressure the asexual woman to construct her identity *out* of the social order and *out* of reality.

Therapy with the adult woman who enjoys autoerotic stimulation and prefers not to have sex with others therefore often includes aiding her to develop more mature methods of achieving satisfaction (Brooks, 1967: pp. 820-823; Halleck, 1971: pp. 104-105).³ In other words:

Children who are told over and over that they are liars or thieves become liars or thieves. People who are told over and over that they are crazy become crazy. If you are told over and over that you are a being who has profound sexual needs the odds are very good that you will discover that you do. Particularly when other outlets are forbidden or discouraged. Particularly when it is emphasized that those who do *not* feel these needs are frigid, neurotic, sexually maladjusted (which for a woman means *essentially* maladjusted) dried up, barren, to be pitied. (Densmore, 1971: p. 58)

Excess consensus about the sinfulness of sexual interaction has had an oppressive impact on the lives of generations of women. Many women who always stimulate themselves autoerotically or who never engage in any form of sexual activity may be suppressing strong desires.⁴ New oppression seems to lie, however, in excess psychiatric consensus that

3. The fantasies which often accompany masturbation have sometimes been used as evidence that those whose total sexual outlet consists of autostimulation are repressed. Masturbation is seen as having an "interpersonal quality . . . in which . . . wishes regarding relationships with another can be fulfilled" (Koff, 1972: p. 55). While this is undoubtedly true for many people, it is popularly acknowledged that many others entertain fantasies involving exotic settings and unusual circumstances which they never intend to actually act out:

"Anything goes in fantasy. It's a healthy out for desires you'd *never* act on. So feel free! Fantasize whatever pleases you (lesbianism, group sex, fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism)—you'll soon be floating into another hazy realm." *Cosmopolitan Love Guide*, 1972: pp. 54-55)

4. Kinsey's research indicated that while masturbation was the most important sexual outlet for the unmarried females in his sample; about 2 per cent of the women studied said they had never recognized sexual arousal under any conditions. (Kinsey, 1953: pp. 512-525)

women who deny their "natural" female functions are just repressed heterosexuals in need of "a good fuck."

ASEXUAL AND AUTOEROTIC WOMEN

During the 1960's the Radical Left advocated egalitarian revolution, but virtually forgot to include women in their plans (Koedt, "Women and the Radical Movement", 1973: pp. 318-321; Willis, 1970: pp. 55-56). Asexual women were similarly ignored by the "sexual revolution" of that same decade.

Fashion magazines, recognized as one barometer of stylish prescription in both clothing and mores, stressed the full sex lives of "liberated" women during this period (Tortora: 1973). By the 1970's, however, a few women readers were writing letters to the editors to protest:

The tortured, belabored and endless articles on orgasm, intercourse, marital games, premarital sex, how-to-do-it-in-56-different-ways-while-playing-the-castanets and the evaluate-your-orgasm charts which all of you [magazines] seem dedicated to explore . . . (*Glamour*, January, 1974: p. 50)

This writer described herself as "a devoted wife, mother of three, affectionate female who abhors sex." She pleaded:

Please, would someone mention the fact that life can be beautiful, meaningful, rich and satisfactory with *or without* sex? It is possible to adore your husband and enjoy affection while the act of intercourse holds anything but appeal. (*Ibid.*)

While feeling that her outlook on life was "warm-blooded, knowledgeable and free of restraint," she seemed to believe that her existence dangerously contradicted accepted psychiatric tenets:

We mustn't breathe a word of opposition, though. We must be all salivating at the sight of the fourposter and if not, seek therapy. (*Ibid.*)

Women sharing similar feelings wrote in support of this possibly asexual woman's statement:

I wholeheartedly agree with the anonymous "Protest." (Jan.) It is about time that the other side of the coin was shown. (*Glamour*, March, 1974).

. . . I'm sure there are a lot more women in the world who feel the same way. I, for one, want to congratulate the woman of this article for speaking up for all of us who are either ashamed or afraid to do so. (*Ibid.*)

Other women also began to suggest to the magazine editors that because some women were being overlooked and left out of the revolution, perhaps the sexual liberation they publicized did not exist:

The cataclysmic change in sexual attitudes in the latter part of the sixties supposedly brought relief to women, burdened for centuries by the hypocritical double standard. Now it seems a new rigidity is developing. A woman is no longer free *not* to have a sex life . . .

This is not a recommendation for a return to the rigid standards of grandma's girlhood nor a put-down of premarital sex. . . . If it was wrong for the self-righteous of the past to condemn a woman who departed from society's cast-iron rule of behavior, it is also wrong for the disciples of today's sexual liberation to downgrade a girl who chooses not to participate.

Because a girl chooses not to have sexual relations does not make her a case for the analyst . . . (Head, 1971: p. 76)

. . . In many ways, sexual freedom is the philosophical toy of the college student. Individuals "discuss" sexual freedom all too often in terms that will serve only to reinforce the choice *they* have made. (*Mademoiselle*, Nov., 1972: p. 224)

Despite publication of these reader protests, however, fashion magazine editorial consensus seems to continue to popularize a consumption-oriented image of the sexually "liberated" woman much like that Una Stannard describes in her "Mask of Beauty":

The modern woman's liberty to expose her legs and most of her body does not signify women's sexual liberation, but only her obsessive desire to please men. Women are "free" to start wearing padded bras at the age of nine and to spend forty-eight million dollars annually in eye make-up alone. Women are free to be Playboy bunnies or to be topless and bottomless waitresses. Women are not free *not* to be sexy. (Stannard, 1971: p. 192)

Not fitting this popular definition of "liberated," the asexual woman seems to only rarely receive recognition in feature articles or staff written columns.⁵ When one recent column did mention "celibate" women, its author's partial motive seemed to be nullification of their "news-worthiness"—their public existence:

One of the women at the speakout described *her* sexual style as celibacy. And recently I read a newspaper article by a woman who said she and her

5. This statement is based on the author's review of three wide-circulation magazines (*Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Seventeen*) from January 1970 through January 1975.

friends believed that celibacy was a "valid sexual alternative." Could this be a trend? If so, what could the media possibly make of this most non-of-non-events? With any luck, not a thing. (Durbin, 1975: p. 24)

THE ASEXUAL AND AUTOEROTIC WOMAN AS POLITICALLY CONSCIOUS

One of the women referred to by the *Mademoiselle* columnist was addressing the Second Annual Conference on Sexuality sponsored by the New York chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW). Although the columnist's remarks suggest a personal contempt for "celibate" women, the theme of her article revolves around the manufacture of sexual fashion, which she feels was reflected at the conference. Autoeroticism and asexuality, once recommended as a demonstration of religious consciousness, are beginning, in some sectors of the feminist movement, to be recommended as one demonstration of political consciousness.

The origin of this newly developing imperative may partially lie in feminist analysis of a growing body of research about vaginal orgasms. The scientific investigations of Kinsey and also Masters and Johnson exposed the vaginal orgasm as a hoax by indicating that the clitoris, rather than the vagina, functions in producing orgasm. (Koedt, 1973a: 201-203).

On the basis of this evidence, many feminists have evaluated the theory of the "vaginal orgasm" as exploitative in its assumption that only the mature, submissive woman, who accepted her "natural" functions, could enjoy it (Atkinson, 1970: p. 42; Koedt, 1973a: pp. 199-200).

Rejecting the vaginal orgasm as a myth created to ensure female sexual dependence on the male, some feminists recognized clitoral orgasm as opening up sexual options for women (Koedt, 1973a: pp. 204-206; Atkinson, 1970: p. 42; *The Feminists* . . . , 1970: pp. 117-118).

Backed scientifically by new evidence that sex may be an "acquired habit, appetite or even addiction" rather than a "biological force" (Wright, 1972: p. 119), the idea of options may have encouraged some women in the Liberation Movement who feel asexual or autoerotic to talk about their lives. (Densmore, 1971: p. 59)

Other feminists, repulsed by the idea of sexual involvement with men who, they feel, oppress and even despise them, have begun to equate sexual options with political strategy (Bernard, 1972: p. 373):

The moving nucleus of feminism is a gradual accretion of women defining themselves irrevocably as political lesbians, women sexually celibate or asexual or lesbian in the traditional sense of the word, who perceive the

bonding of women in every phase of existence as the *sine qua non* of feminist revolution. (Johnston, 1973)

We must destroy the institution of heterosexual sex which is a manifestation of the male-female role. Since physical pleasure can be achieved in both sexes by autoerotic acts, sex as a social act is psychologically in nature; at present its psychology is dominance-passivity. (*The Feminists* . . ., 1970: pp. 117-118)

In seeking to liberate women, the advocates of these strategies may be inviting yet another tyranny. A consensus which praises women who do not have sex with men as politically conscious might alleviate the oppression of traditionally assigned female functions, but would probably create new oppressive functions. The woman who still wants to have sex with men might function as "scapegoat" and the woman who feels asexual or autosexual might function as a political symbol—her identity still lost in the slogans, and her reality going unnoticed.

CONCLUSION

Asexual and autoerotic women seem seldom to have been accorded the equal right to be different, the equal right to celebrate their unique experiences in the world. For their violation of established female function, they have been oppressed by a societal consensus that they, as free and unique individuals, do not exist. Again and again, their personal experiences have been redefined for them in terms of socially constructed meanings: they are "ascetic," "neurotic," "unliberated," or "politically conscious." Their sexual preferences are explained away in the rhetoric of whatever sexual ideology seems currently to be in vogue.

The assumption that members of certain groups, as a function of their being so identified, need help may be one force in the perpetuation of this kind of consensual redefinition of experience. When women as a group were considered sexually sinful, those women who preferred not to have sexual relations with others were often "helped" in their struggle with evil through religious asceticism. When women as a group came to be viewed as performing important sexual and reproductive functions for men, those women who preferred not to have sexual relations with others were frequently "helped" by therapy in working through their neuroticism. Now that women as a group are beginning to be redefined as "oppressed" in their relationships with men, those women who prefer not to have sexual relations with others are sometimes "helped" in their struggle for "consciousness" through political support.

One possible explanation for this "helping" system might be that because these asexual and autoerotic women are different they must be

"consensually redefined," "fitted into" and "understood" in the gestalt of the dominant, or alternative, society in question in order to avoid social upheaval. In this context, religion, therapy and politics might all be viewed as mechanisms of social control useful in maintaining the reality of established ideas against serious challenge.

HELPING ASEXUAL AND AUTOEROTIC WOMEN TO BE THEMSELVES

In the framework of this broad kind of social policy perspective, women who, for a portion or all of their lives, feel asexual or autoerotic may cease to be victims only when people no longer feel a need to conceptualize each other in terms of the "functions" they can perform—when the "sexual is dissolved into the fully personal . . . and . . . sexual ideologies are discarded." (Wright, 1972: p. 121)

Pat allusions to sweeping changes in social structure, however, can sometimes oversimplify the complexity of life. These generalizations can easily become just another way of ignoring the individual uniqueness of human beings; an excuse for not attempting to provide relief for those people now in psychic pain. Black psychiatrists, for example, have angrily cried "racism" against the contentions of some of their colleagues that they cannot effectively treat black patients until the prejudiced attitudes of the society which oppresses them have been altered (Thomas and Sillen, 1972: p. 139). A similar analogy could be made regarding asexual and autoerotic women.

If you have an alive body, no one can tell you how to experience the world. And no one can tell you what truth is, because you experience it. The body does not lie. (Keleman in Braun, 1975: p. 9)

Some of the newest therapies do propose, at least on paper, that the aim of therapy should be to furnish support and insight for the individual's life-style, with acceptance and respect for his or her individuality (*Vocations for Social Change*, 1975: p. 106; Grimstead and Rennie, 1975: p. 60).

While the power of politics to group and redefine the life experiences of asexual and autoerotic women can be illustrated by a look at some camps of the feminist movement, other feminists interpret feminism as freeing all women to express their sexual uniqueness in an atmosphere of acceptance:

Sex can be expressed with a woman, with a man, with a group of people, alone, or not practiced at all. (Mander and Rush, 1974: p. 24)

Going unnoticed in society, being told that one doesn't feel what one feels but that, indeed, one feels something else can be a very painful and even debilitating experience for some women. Feminist consciousness-raising sessions and group therapies are beginning, hopefully, to work like this in exploring such problems:

If a woman continually blames herself for her inadequacies . . . the group works with her to explore what part is her responsibility and what part is imposed on her by society. Thus she is at the same time encouraged to assume responsibility and to relinquish responsibility for the part that is not hers so that she can be freed of that burden and grow. (Mander and Rush, 1974: p. 17)

This can often increase the awareness "that there is in fact nothing wrong with the tormented individual, but a great deal wrong with the social circumstances which limit her life choices" (Grimstad and Rennie, 1975: p. 66).

Some women coming to grips with their longtime feelings that they prefer not to have sex with others—and others who are initially recognizing these feelings after perhaps years of involvement in lesbian or heterosexual activities—may want support in making their transition.

Even autoerotic women may have orgasmic difficulties. In fact, one serious drawback of the Masters and Johnson type of sex therapy for these women is its emphasis on working with couples, thus excluding women who are single, temporarily between sex partners, or autoerotic in orientation (Grimstad and Rennie, 1975: pp. 54–55).

Alfred Kinsey (1953) demonstrated that not everyone has or maintains one exclusive sexual preference throughout an entire lifetime. The woman who has felt asexual or autoerotic and is beginning to feel differently may want support in the transition to another point on the sexual continuum:

When celibacy no longer feels good we should get out of it—but that's easier said than done. And it feels harder the longer we have been celibate. Coming out of celibacy, we may feel embarrassed by needs that seem insatiable. (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1973: p. 44)

It is recognized, of course, that a few women may have very deep and complex difficulties which cannot simply be attributed to society. They may exhibit asexual or autoerotic behavior while really wanting something entirely different or even because of fear of any kind of physical intimacy.

"Helping," therefore, takes on the discriminatory tone that robs women of the truth of individual experiences when it makes them victims

of excess consensus, with the underlying assumption being that all or most asexual or autoerotic women, because of their orientation, need help.

If a woman feels that she does want help in any of these areas she should realize that the political biases of therapists, whether conscious or unconscious, frequently influence their work (Halleck, 1971). Thus, she might want to interview prospective therapists to see if she will be able to work with them without having the truth of her life altered to fit another truth.⁶

Before an asexual or autoerotic woman decides on sometimes expensive professional guidance, however, she might first try tapping the strengths within herself. The following is a description of a woman learning to love the appearance of her physical body, but the concept involved could as easily be applied to an asexual or autoerotic woman accepting the uniqueness of her life:

I stood as though I were proud before I was proud, and then I became proud. (Braun, 1975: p. 16)

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6. *Guidelines for Women Seeking Psychotherapy* provides detailed advice on how to select a therapist. It is available from Cleveland Women's Counseling, P.O. Box 18472, Cleveland, Ohio 44118 for 50¢ per copy.