

# Sex Drive

In pursuit of female desire



Dr Bella Ellwood-Clayton,  
sexual anthropologist

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Some of the material in this book has been published previously: parts of Chapter 4 first appeared as an article in the journal *Philippines* as 'Constructions of seduction: premarital sex in the Catholic Philippines' (2007) and as a feature article in *Cosmopolitan's* pregnancy supplement as 'A Sensual Pregnancy' (Winter, 2009). Part of Chapter 6 first appeared in *The Canberra Times* as 'Love drugs and no cure for relationship problems' (28 June 2010). And parts of Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 10 first appeared as columns in *Sunday Life* magazine between 2009 and 2011.

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The information in this book is intended as a guide only, and should not substitute medical care and advice. Always consult your doctor about medical advice in the first instance.

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# Introduction

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## [The crisis in women's sexuality](#)

**It's the end** of another long day and you've barely survived it. You stand at the mirror and brush your teeth, scrutinising the lines on your face. You wonder, as you open the little bottle, when you started using cream specifically for the under-eye region. Was that the point when you started ageing?

You crawl into bed and rest your body against your partner's solid form. Although he is also tired, his mouth finds your neck and his hands bring you closer. But you don't want the intimacy, the physical connection. You'd like to sleep, read your novel, or analyse why your co-worker is so mercurial. Besides, you don't feel the least bit sexy, and everybody knows that's the key to everything.

When it comes to women's priorities, is sex on top? A study discussed later in the book estimated that 43 per cent of American women are dissatisfied with sex.<sup>1</sup> A Canadian journal reported that 30–35 per cent of women experienced a lack of sexual desire.<sup>2</sup> Research in Germany found that once a woman is in a secure relationship her sex drive begins to plummet.<sup>3</sup>

Women are collectively not in the mood because inside our cerebral cortex, where arousal originates, there is a to-do list that is never-ending. And just when it looks like you've nailed all the tasks, another lot file in, obliterating any thought of sex.

Yet I find the shift in our priorities perplexing. Too busy for sex . . . but how is it that we still have enough time to soak our whites, get our shoes re-heeled and make pasta sauce?

In the beginning, it wasn't like this. In fact, there was nothing more important than our lover. In the beginning we yearned for him. We chose lovely outfits solely for him to unzip. We gave him back rubs, for goodness' sake.

But after moving in together or having babies, is it a *fait accompli*? Do we now rest on our romantic laurels?

I sometimes wonder what our partners would think of us if they were first meeting us now. The man you're with probably wouldn't decide to spend his life with a woman who didn't really feel like kissing him, considered sex a nuisance, and—as one study has shown, would rather he Hoover than hold her.<sup>4</sup> There are also costs arising from our sexual indifference, if infidelity and divorce rates are considered. But even worse is the loss of our own spirit and vitality.

We tell ourselves we are too tired, and perhaps we are. We are goddesses of multi-tasking. But what are we really trying to accomplish? A relationship that stays dynamic is like a well-tended plant—consistently nurtured and watered. It may be time to redirect some of the creative, dedicated energy we give our children, our dinner tables and our workplaces to the sensuality of our marriages and partnerships. When did sensuality slip off the list?



Sex is not simply two bodies coming together. Sex—the way we think about it, whether we desire it, how we go about getting it, and how we have it—is shaped by the culture we live in, by the time period we share, and by whether we inhabit a male or female body.

This book explores the female libido: what it is, how it works, why it becomes depleted, and ways we can increase it, if we wish.

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Libido—most often defined as the drive associated with sexual energy—represents our desire for interest in sexual union and pleasure. Our sex drive may involve fantasies, attraction to others, the seeking out of sexual activity, and increased genital sensitivity. Women's libidos are something of a mystery, because throughout history, female sexuality has been considered sinful. Our culture has never encouraged us to extend our sensuous arms to see what we can find, to see what we can taste. For many years, and still in many countries, our libido has been suppressed by religion. And most gods, it seems, cast a disapproving eye on sensual women—those who enjoy their desire, those who value pleasure.

The work of feminists in the 1960s has given women more choice. More money in their bank accounts, better contraception, higher education, and a wider dating pool. From all walks of life, in all continents, women young and old are doing things differently from their mothers and their grandmothers. Including sex. They are finding sex online, with strangers, in second marriages . . . finding it for its own sake. But just as our shackles have loosened, new assaults have been launched.

It used to be the church that made us feel bad. Now advertising does the job. We may no longer feel as much sexual shame, but now we feel ugly. Our sexual expression has become less taboo because now money can be made from it. The new story has something to sell: it says sexual happiness can be bought.

This story tells us that our libido should be like liquid, flowing, abundant. Not only should we look desirable, we should also actively desire: *crave sex, initiate sex, relish sex*. As well, of course, as steering a career and raising glossy, articulate children.

And what of those relationships lacking in such carnality, or that don't match that impossible Hollywood portrait: the amalgamation of desire and familiarity, of passion and monogamy? They are decreed inferior, impotent. And the woman too fatigued for foreplay is labelled sexually dysfunctional. To counter their disinterest drugs are being trialled and marketed in hopes of discovering a 'pink Viagra'.

Recent studies confirm that lack of libido is the most common sexual problem in Western women. But how can that be, in the wake of the sexual revolution? Is 'low libido' itself a construct, a conspiracy of sorts against women?

Contemporary urban life is creating a mind-body disconnect in which women don't want sex because they don't *feel sexy*. Body image and childbirth can profoundly change the way women see themselves, just as parenting can rob their focus. Relationship, professional and personal problems also contribute to depression, and antidepressant medication often has a devastating effect on libido. Furthermore, ageing in a culture that glorifies youth renders the mature woman unappealing. To be 'natural' in our society is to be undesirable.

Women's libido is under real threat from the lives we lead, our relationship troubles and overburdened schedules, and from the wider forces of media and marketing. Expectations—what we *believe* we deserve, and what we *believe* our sexuality should be like—clash with the reality we find when we undress and lie naked in our bed.

A constellation of questions led to the birth of this book. They included: What do we really know about female libido? Do we have unrealistic expectations about our sex drive? Who defines what is normal and abnormal? Could 'low libido' in fact be the natural order of things?



This book has grown from the ground up, born from analysing hundreds of academic papers, and books about sexuality, reviewing statistics from around the globe, interviewing about ninety strangers and having many conversations with colleagues and friends.<sup>5</sup> When I started it, I was newly married. By the time I finished, I had two children.

I hope it helps you better understand and discover your own authentic sex drive.

## Libido and the naked body

**Instead of going** to church for atonement, like many women my age living in secular cultures I head to the gym. For chemical salvation: the mood enhancement that comes with endorphin release. At first, I only went to yoga and Pilates classes. Here men and women held wide postures like prehistoric birds and made noises of wind through their throats. But after months of sun salutations, I desired a change. Enter high-cardio workouts. Body Pump, Body Combat, Body Attack. Like Army Special Forces, the women around me rose to each challenge. But as the weeks passed, I began to wonder why. Why had we ended up in this underworld of urban self-flagellation—to appease the gods of vanity? If exercise was the new religion, these were the fitnesscenti. But I wondered, in an age where sex is scarce, why were we getting dirty in the gym, but not in our beds?

**Our desire to appear desirable exceeds desire itself** Being confronted by these pretty, dedicated gym junkies brought Naomi Wolf's 1991 book *The Beauty Myth* to mind.<sup>1</sup> How women look—or, more importantly, how we *think* we look—is still at the heart of much of our anxiety. The effects of this on our libido, our sexual vitality, are not to be underestimated.

Let's begin with a simple fact. Sex is far better for women when they feel sexy. Herein lies the rub: modern-day women rarely feel sexy. Far too much stands in the way. And often what turns women *on* and *off* is . . . themselves. Feeling good about the way we look is the best foreplay of all—but rather than seeking lust in someone else's eyes, we seek it in the mirror.

Women's sexual self-esteem often reflects how we judge our appearance against the current ideal. As a result, for many, the prerequisites of feeling sexy in Western culture leave most too tired, or perceivably lacking, to want sex.

The human body is not something we like to leave in its natural form. Across history and across cultures, we have adorned our bodies with flowers and jewellery, fabrics, dyes and make-up, tattoos and through scarification. We have altered our bodies, or mutilated them—binding our feet, lengthening our necks, corseting our ribs, and undergoing cosmetic surgery.

It is not new to suffer for beauty, and some theorists argue that preferences for youth and beauty are innate.<sup>2</sup> But in the past we generally adorned or altered our bodies to mark ourselves as members of our tribe or culture; beautifying acts were meaningfully ritualised. Our allegiance now, however, appears to be to the images we are fed by the media and the public validation we receive if we can match them, whether through exercise, make-up, dress, diet or cosmetic procedures.

Photography allowed images of the female body to be transmitted on a large scale.<sup>3</sup> Today we have constant access to 'beauty pornography', as Wolf puts it. The more widely images of the female body are distributed, the more deeply contemporary norms are imprinted on women's consciousness, leading to anxiety, bodily dissatisfaction and sexual ambivalence.

In previous eras, women had a better shot at meeting the ideal. They could henna their hands. They could tattoo their bodies. They could insert those African discs called *labrets* into their lips. But what happens when the beauty presented to women as ideal is physically unachievable?

Take Barbie. Most young girls in America, from the age of three upwards, own a Barbie doll. A

study comparing body measurements of models, store mannequins and Barbie dolls found that: ‘[a] young woman randomly chosen from the reference population would have a 7 per cent chance of being as ectomorphic [slender] as a catwalk model, a 3 per cent chance of matching an international model, a 0.3 per cent chance of matching a shop mannequin, a 0.1 per cent chance of matching a ‘supermodel’, and no chance at all of matching Barbie’.<sup>4</sup> Talk about setting us up for a fall.

Women are more critical of their appearance than men are of theirs, and most women in Western cultures are dissatisfied with their bodies, which affects their sense of self and sexual identity. Feeling that they are naturally lacking, many women try to buy beauty. The British writer Susie Orbach says ‘we have become enslaved not just to consumerism but to the body as our personal product which we must shape and reshape according to the dictates created in the market but felt individually’.<sup>5</sup>

Few of us are immune to the desire to upgrade ourselves. What with online shopping for miracle beauty potions and on-foot shopping for slimming clothes, famine dieting and other tasks of vanity, it’s no wonder we have little time left for such primitive activities as coupling. And for the wealthy there is no end to the beauty candy in which one can indulge: teeth bleaching, lunchtime Botox, liposuction and stylists-come-analysts.

Despite the hours, money and emotion invested in beauty, fashion and exercise, few Western women feel they measure up. With advertising pushing a juvenile standard of beauty—unaged, unlined, undernourished yet over sexed—the competition is ruthless and impossible to trump. Cindy Crawford is quoted as saying, ‘Even I don’t look like Cindy Crawford in the morning.’

Increasingly women work—and pay—to fight the clock. Americans spend \$28 billion a year on toiletries and beauty products.<sup>6</sup> Tweens (children aged 8–12) and teens constitute more than one-third of the personal-care market in the US.<sup>7</sup>

One study found that women in Britain spend an average of £3000 a year on beauty products and treatments, with 81 per cent wearing make-up every day; only 3 per cent said that they felt naturally beautiful.<sup>8</sup> Another British study found that women owned, on average, 86 different toiletries. Significantly, when asked how make-up made them feel, 73 per cent said they felt *sexier* and 53 per cent said they were more flirtatious. Only 10 per cent said they felt younger. The total cost of a lifetime’s supply of beauty products and treatments was calculated to be £182,528.<sup>9</sup>

Wouldn’t you think that we’d have better things to do? Looking good is important, of course. And feels great—sometimes even euphoric—to have a new haircut, to buy strappy stilettos, to feel that some part of us is beautiful. But with millions of people starving, perhaps we should question our priorities. If we can’t look like Angelina Jolie, perhaps we should act like her. Save the husband-snagging.

The Dalai Lama has said: ‘External beauty—you can make . . . I think quite expensive. Some make them look like [they] come from outer space. Therefore, I think inner beauty very important.’<sup>10</sup> A Russian archbishop says that if we devoted all the time we spend putting on make-up to prayer and repentance, ‘true beauty would then shine forth from a woman’s face’.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, our hyper-focus on appearing gorgeous is having the opposite effect on how we feel inside. Rather than having sex, women simply want to *look* like they are having sex. Our desire to *appear* desirable exceeds anything to do with sexual desire itself.

We are too busy chasing beautiful to want to kiss beautifully. Too busy chasing the veneer of desirability, to desire. Yin and yang at play. The pursuit of appearing desirable negatively affects our

engagement of desire. Our animal instincts have become inverted: time devoted to preening override time devoted to mating and sexual pleasure.

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## Enter the plastic age

We now submit to a new form of self-flagellation, cosmetic surgery, in hopes of matching the Hollywood ideal. According to the Australian National University's Rhian Parker cosmetic surgery evolved from reconstructive plastic surgery. This developed when syphilis was prevalent: the disease often caused a collapse of cartilage in the nose, which doctors reconstructed. After World War I, disfigured soldiers had plastic surgery so they could re-enter society. Gradually, women became aware of the transformative power of cosmetic surgery.

In 1926 a Parisian designer named Suzanne Geoffre, wanting to meet the boyish ideal of the era, underwent cosmetic surgery to have her calves made thinner.<sup>12</sup> Her surgeon screwed up, and Suzanne's leg had to be amputated. Suzanne sued. Amazingly, the surgeon's lawyers argued that because of the social importance of beauty, cosmetic surgery offered a necessary service. The courts sided with Suzanne, pronouncing that a surgeon should not perform a dangerous operation on a healthy body in the name of beauty. Now, of course, doing so is commonplace.

Cosmetic surgery is increasingly popular and socially acceptable. In Australia in 2010, \$745.1 million was spent on plastic surgery procedures, while cosmetic procedures (including surgery) represented the fastest growing segment of the beauty industry, with an estimated 22.5 percent rise in expenditure in 2010–11, to \$555 million.<sup>13</sup> Cosmetic procedures in the UK rose by 50 per cent in 2008 alone; women mostly desired breast implants, facelifts and eye surgery.<sup>14</sup>

About 12.5 million cosmetic surgery procedures—invasive and noninvasive—were performed in the US in 2009, up 69 per cent since 2000; 91 per cent of the procedures were performed on women.<sup>15</sup> Predictably, the most popular type of surgery was breast augmentation. There is also an increasing demand for gluteal implants, specifically to achieve a Jennifer Lopez bottom. Bootylicious.

The number of people under 18 having cosmetic surgery in the US has risen by 14 per cent since 2003.<sup>16</sup> American teenagers account for 4 per cent of the plastic surgery market, with 346,000 cosmetic procedures performed in 2004.<sup>17</sup> As with many US fads, other Western youth will likely mimic this trend. The most common operations performed on young Australians are breast augmentations, breast reductions, nose jobs and liposuction.<sup>18</sup>

Australian health sociologist Rhian Parker points to how in the past, cosmetic surgery was the realm of film stars and TV personalities, but it has now become the prerogative of 'ordinary women'. Indeed, ordinary women en masse are overidentifying with celebrities. According to Parker, women often turn to cosmetic procedures because they feel nature has taken something away from them through genetics, childbearing or ageing. The aim of cosmetic surgery, Parker says, is not just to change physical features but to deliver the *vision* women have of themselves. As such, women are 'enthralled by doctors who seem to magically use their power to make any woman "beautiful"'. These doctors, she writes, 'have become technicians of women's dreams'.<sup>19</sup>

Deciding to have cosmetic surgery may be a beneficial individual choice, as any viewer of *Extreme Makeover* or *Ten Years Younger in Ten Days* will attest. But this does not change the fact that our culture encourages the objectification of women's bodies and allows little room for variation in its standard of female beauty.

The body has become a site of renovation, a personal reconstruction project that supersedes biology. In the 21st century the successful body is lean and well cared for. This is no clearer than in TV shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, where the flabby and imperfect bodies of shamed participants are bared for all to see. As the American philosopher Alphonso Lingis writes: ‘Our “body image” is not an image formed in the privacy of our own imagination: its visible, tangible and audible shape is held in the gaze and touch of others.’<sup>20</sup> Women’s appraisal of their bodies, their beauty and their desirability is a product of the social gaze, as well as of their own inner gaze and self-surveillance.

### **Too fat to fuck**

We can’t talk about women’s libido without addressing the weighty issue of women’s weight. Like cosmetic surgery, dieting often stems from the desire to look ‘better’—in other words, thinner and sexier.

An Australian study found that more than 92 per cent of women experience ‘fat days’, and one in five regularly starve themselves to lose weight. Just under half of the women surveyed said they felt fat every day, and 67 per cent were uncomfortable seeing their naked body. The main researcher Adrian Schembri said that women struggling with weight ritually check their bodies, with increasing anxiety.<sup>21</sup> If they are uncomfortable just spying their naked body, how uncomfortable must they be *using* their naked body—seducing, surrendering, unfolding?

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health has found that among women aged 18–22, 47.8 per cent have dieted to lose weight within the past year; startlingly, 20.9 per cent of underweight women had also been dieting. And the mean age for the onset of dieting was 15.4 years.<sup>22</sup>

A number of studies have found that after looking at thin fashion models, people see their own bodies less favorably.

The increasing body-image worries of young women have coincided with a rising incidence of anxiety and depression. Australian researcher Richard Eckersley says our culture is ‘eroding our sense of our worth and significance by parading before us people who are more powerful, more beautiful, more successful, more exciting.’<sup>23</sup>

From a very early age, girls are affected by images they see in the media. It’s estimated that girls aged 11 to 14 are subjected to some 500 advertisements a day—most of which have been airbrushed. Our young female population is suffering. An Australian study of 8900 girls found eating disorders, smoking and laxative abuse rife among those aged 12 to 18. One girl in five starves herself or vomits to control her weight, and the number of girls who starve themselves has nearly doubled since 2000.<sup>24</sup>

According to an American study, the sexualisation of young girls and women undermines their confidence about their bodies, leading to self-image problems, shame and anxiety. These have in turn been linked with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood; they also impair girls’ ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image.<sup>25</sup> Through all forms of media—TV, music videos, magazines, video games, advertising campaigns—and the internet, young people are exposed to an adult world. In our hypersexed pop culture the message is simple: ‘hotness’ is the *raison d’être*. New York fashion writer Simon Doonan has given a name to the look many Western women, young and old, now work to emulate: ‘porno chic’.<sup>26</sup>

Girls show less satisfaction with their physical appearance than do boys, starting as young as third

grade.<sup>27</sup> The media also has a stronger influence on adolescent girls than adolescent boys. A four-year study of girls found that the peak onset of binge eating occurs at 16, and of purging at 18. It is no coincidence that these are the ages when young women become ultra-aware of their appearance.<sup>28</sup>

The Dutch ethnographer Harry Hoetink coined the term *somatic norm* to refer to the shared image of an ideal physical type, say Cameron Diaz. *Somatic distance*, on the other hand, conveys the degree of difference from that norm, say, ourselves. Women are experiencing somatic distance on a global scale leading, in part, to a collapse of female libido. As the author Susan Faludi observed: ‘The beauty industry may seem the most superficial of the cultural institutions participating in the backlash, but its impact on women was, in many respects, the most intimately destructive—to both female bodies and minds’.<sup>29</sup>

How women feel about their bodies directly affects how they feel about sex. According to Australia’s first large-scale national survey of sexual behaviour and attitudes, 35.9 per cent of women and 14.2 per cent of men worry during sex about whether they look attractive or not, and this negatively affects their sexual experience.<sup>30</sup>

If we are anxious about our appearance, how can we let go and open ourselves to the sensual realm and connect to our sexual centre? Religion tells us we should be sexless, popular culture tells us we should be nymphomaniacs, advertising tells us we need to be beautiful to have sex, and our partners, bless them, just pray to have sex once in a while.

Sasha, 28, lives in Melbourne, works in the fashion industry and has been with her boyfriend for eight years. Discussing her low libido, she says:

At the moment I’d like to join the gym. I’m not obese—it’s not bad, but I could lose 5 kilos. As a result I guess I don’t feel comfortable getting undressed and being seductive when I don’t feel comfortable inside myself . . . I’m sure some men are like ‘I love you anyway’, whereas my boyfriend actually suggests I go to the gym. Suppose I were to lose 5 kilos, I wonder if I’d be more in the mood?

When asked when she feels sexy, Sasha says, ‘I feel sexy when I get dressed up, we go out, and other men pay attention to me.’

Lee, 39, works in retail, has a long-term boyfriend, and is a mother of two children in primary school. Of beauty she says:

We all dream to be sexy and all the rest, but it’s not at all achievable. When you do take your clothes off and are ready to be intimate, there’s always that guarded sense of carrying extra weight, or your boobs sagging, and I’m sure that doesn’t help with the whole sex-drive thing.

Marla, a 25-year-old graduate student, says:

My weight definitely affects my sex life. A couple of years ago I was about 10 kilos heavier and I hated being touched. If a guy tried to touch my belly, squeeze my butt, or put an arm around my waist all I could think about was him feeling my fat.

These women are not alone in their discomfort in disrobing. For many women, perceptions about being overweight interfere with libido. A recent study found that 80 per cent of the Australian women surveyed felt too fat to want to make love. After rating their physical appearance, a quarter of the women said they considered their looks ‘disgusting’. A quarter also said they’d prefer to eat live insects than walk naked in a lit room.<sup>31</sup>

We know that lots of men see women as objects of sexual pleasure. But what happens when women begin to see *themselves* this way too—as objects to be evaluated? According to researchers Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, our culture's emphasis on women's beauty leads to *self-objectification*: the tendency for women to regard our physical self primarily in terms of appearance, and to adopt an observer's view of it.<sup>32</sup> *Body, pretty nice. Good hair. Face looks tired. Fairly decent tits.*

Given that men are the main consumers of sexualised imagery and expect potential romantic partners to be sexually appealing, it is believed that female self-objectification stems from the wish to appeal to romantic partners.<sup>33</sup> Self-objectification has been linked to body shame, anxiety and sexual self-consciousness in women.

The sex researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson argued that sexual self-consciousness—which they termed *spectatoring*—undermines men and women's sexual responsiveness and satisfaction. Inspecting, monitoring and evaluating oneself from a third-person perspective while getting it on, rather than focusing on one's sensations or sexual partner, can increase performance fears and hinder sexual performance.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, David Barlow's model of sexual functioning suggests that the thoughts that arise from spectatoring interrupt sexual performance, and that impairments in sexual functioning are often the result of disruptions in the mental processing of erotic cues.<sup>35</sup> Preoccupation with our appearance makes it hard to relax, hard to focus on being aroused, and ultimately hard to experience sexual pleasure.

Self-consciousness may also reduce awareness of our own physiological arousal. Research shows that women are generally less attuned to their own physical states than men. For example, in the absence of contextual cues, women are less accurate in estimating their heartbeat, blood glucose levels and stomach contractions than men.<sup>36</sup> This also extends to the sexual arena: women's subjective and physiological experiences of arousal do not correlate as well as men's, with women underestimating their true levels of physical arousal,<sup>37</sup> possibly because of their greater sexual self-consciousness.

Studies confirm this mind–body disconnect: women's subjective sense of arousal correlates poorly with measured genital congestion. Basically a lot of studies were done where women were made to sit down and watch porn and asked throughout viewing how turned on they were. Beats jury duty. Although many said they had no, or very low arousal, their vagina told a different story. In other words, you might be turned on, you just don't know it. Even if you are physically aroused, this doesn't necessarily correspond to how you feel about it. Our brains are our true G-spot.

Although low body image is more prevalent among women, men are under increasing pressure to be lean, muscular and erect. As naked male bodies appear more frequently in women's magazines,<sup>38</sup> movies and other media, men too are becoming objects of the female public gaze.

Naomi Wolf uses the term 'beauty pornography' to describe the plethora of sexed images that we encounter. But rather than creating an environment of eroticism, the cumulative load of so many sexual come-ons only dulls women's libidos, for they prompt the devastating comparison: this is *me*, and this is *you*, and the space between is . . . vast.

Nevertheless, plump-lipped, high-heeled model/vixens have come to represent sexuality to both men *and* women—making most of us feel rather unattractive, and therefore more easily exploited by mass marketers. As Wolf writes, 'Advertising aimed at women works by lowering our self-esteem. If it flatters our self-esteem it is not effective.'<sup>39</sup> It makes you think, doesn't it: if advertising got off on

backs, we might just get onto ours.

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But it is not only ‘beauty pornography’ that has led to mass female body anxiety. Sexual pornography plays a large role too.

In any given second, 28,258 internet users are viewing pornography and 372 internet users are typing adult terms into search engines. Every 39 minutes, a new pornographic video is created in the US.<sup>40</sup>

When once ‘dirty pictures’ could be found inscribed on cave walls, when once risqué centerfolds were tucked under the mattress, now all kinds of pornography can be accessed instantaneously on our laptops. We can go to any country and view any sex act. There are no borders. The effects of this pornography flood are yet to be fully understood, but it inarguably harms female libido. Women in pornography are typically young and often surgically altered. Even their labia look uncommonly similar—even, hairless and small.

Pornography has increased women’s insecurity about their genitals. Artist Jamie McCartney’s *The Great Wall of Vagina*—400 casts of real women’s genitalia—allows viewers to glimpse the myriad shapes of the vulva.

Wearing make-up, undergoing cosmetic surgery or watching pornography—a common sex therapists’ tool for couples—isn’t innately harmful. But perhaps we should question the relationship between these and other factors that can undermine women’s sexual sense of self, both individually and collectively.

In the advertising story the ageing woman’s body is no longer beautiful. Nor is a mother’s body, her breasts droopy, her belly repugnant. The message of advertising rarely changes: buy this product and you will feel happier. Beauty is consumable. In the 1980s feminists directed their critique at men’s objectification of women, but now, most women are guilty of the same act: objectifying ourselves, and one another.

Beauty, sex and women are uncomfortable bedfellows. At one extreme are models trotting down the catwalk like emaciated long-haired ponies, representing a benchmark of female desirability. At the other extreme is us.

But what if we could find ways to feel sexy without comparing ourselves to others?

Doing things that make us feel ‘in tune’ can gift us with personal vitality. Being more conscious of what beauty pornography we bring into our home can give us more control over what images we compare. Cultivating dynamic projects can channel this drive away from body ambitions to ones that are more gratifying overall. Sensualising our daily life can provide an earthiness to our everyday affairs.

Leaving the house with our partner, having a glass (or three) of shiraz and a meal we didn’t cook ourselves can help put us in the mood. But beyond this, real work is called for. Finding ways to feel sexually alive, alert and beautiful is up to us. We should not let advertisers dictate what makes us feel desirable, or what makes us feel desire. We must claim this territory back as something personal, private and individual, not simply a product of the market.

Let us applaud the woman who decides to leave the house today with a naked face, unpainted. The young Asian woman who tosses her skin-whitening cream into the wastebasket. The woman who, despite feeling overweight, opens the door to her husband stripped of clothes, ready to strip him of his.

We live in a makeover culture. According to the sociologist Anthony Elliot consumerism seduces

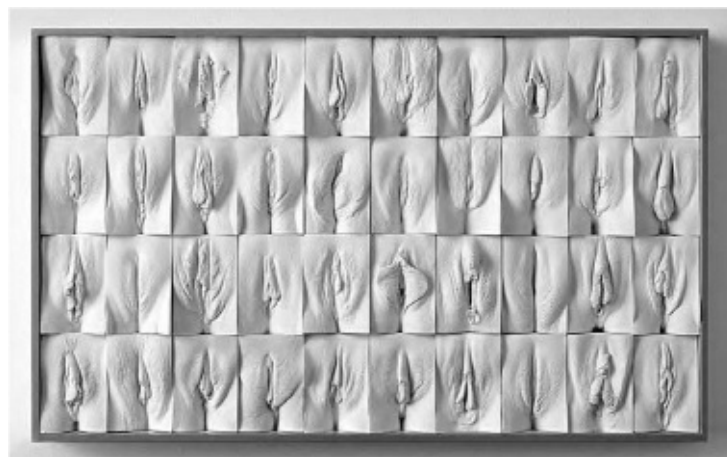


by us offering instantaneous upgrades to our identity.<sup>41</sup> We have quicksilver desires. We make over our homes and our bodies—all in pursuit of perfection. DIY self-renovation projects are replacing DIY sex and meaningful relationships. In contemporary culture feeling erotically alive—full of vitality, zest, desire to touch, use your lips, express feeling through your body—has become overridden by a mind–body disconnect whereby women don’t want sex because they don’t *feel sexy*. Let us uproot this and redirect organic forms of sensuality into our daily lives.

Let’s ask ourselves how else we could define our desirability, aside from the ways prescribed to us. Why does our desirability seem so much more important than our desire? Could we spend our time, money and energy, on something more rewarding than appearance?

I end this chapter with an anecdote. I once worked with *National Geographic* in the lush jungles of Sumatra, Indonesia. I was examining how physical appearance—particularly tattooing and body art—was experienced by the locals. By night the crew and I slept on the floor of the shaman’s hut beneath a wreath of monkey skulls, and by day I documented the ways in which women adorned themselves—their use of flowers, beads and tattoos.

A few days in, I conducted a focus group discussion with the village women. We gathered together on a raised bamboo platform, above a noisy *mêlée* of roosters and pigs. And then I brought out a picture, an image of the West, which I was hoping would inspire stimulating research fodder. And there she was in her trademark red swimsuit, her blond Barbie doll hair like an iridescent halo. Aided by the translator, I pointed to the picture of Pamela Anderson and asked the most profound of anthropological questions: ‘Do you think she’s attractive?’



‘The Great Wall of Vagina’, a cast of four hundred real-life genitalia by Jamie McCartney, Brighton, UK.

The women replied immediately. ‘Of course she is beautiful,’ they said. ‘She is in a magazine.’ I then asked the group if they liked the way they looked, or whether they would change anything about their bodies if they had could. They seemed confused. They looked at one another, shaking their heads. And then they said they would not change a thing, because they were healthy.

Oh, right . . . health.

In pursuit of looking ‘perfect’ if young, or ‘young’ if mature, Western women have become desensitised to the beauty of our body’s functionality. We take for granted that we menstruate in mysterious synchrony with the moon. That our body can unfold and be rocked by orgasm. And that we can carry and give birth to a child. Instead of valuing these marvels, we demean our bodies. We demand more from them than they can naturally offer. We damn them not to age, and hate them when they do. Rather than looking down at our legs and thanking them for enabling us to walk, we curse the cellulite on our thighs. If our bodies were a friend or a lover, they would likely seek a more

appreciative partner.

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## Desperately seeking libido

**Men's Health magazine** once called the bed the single greatest piece of exercise equipment ever invented.<sup>1</sup> Beats Stairmaster or Zumba surely. The pulse rate of an aroused person rises from about 70 to 150 beats per minute, similar to that of an athlete at maximum effort. Frequent sexual intercourse is associated with a lower risk of fatal coronary heart disease.<sup>2</sup> Australian researchers say that by ejaculating more than five times a week, men in their 20s can reduce their risk of prostate cancer by a third.<sup>3</sup> Frequent ejaculations—21 or more a month—have also been linked to lower prostate cancer risk in older men.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, sex, like carrots, is good for us. Regular sex has been claimed to have a host of physical and psychological benefits, from combating depression and boosting wellbeing and self-esteem, to reducing stress, thanks to the release of feel-good, pain-relieving endorphins in the brain. Sex and orgasms increase levels of the hormone oxytocin, which helps us bond and build trust, thereby improving intimacy. Oxytocin released during orgasm also promotes calmness and sleep, and can even help wounds heal faster.<sup>5</sup>

Having regular sex has been linked to higher levels of the antibody immunoglobulin A, which may boost the immune system and protect us from colds.<sup>6</sup> Sex also strengthens pelvic-floor muscles, lowering our risk of incontinence later in life, and boosts the production of testosterone, which leads to stronger bones and muscles.

If that doesn't sell you, the beauty effects might. Sweating during sex cleanses the pores, resulting in healthier skin. Screw L'Oréal. Depending how vigorous it is, sex can burn a lot of calories and tone a woman's pelvis, thighs, buttocks, arms and neck.

Sex also has the extraordinary ability to connect two people, to make them feel fused. To tackle high divorce rates, even the church advocates sex. For example, a Florida church challenged its married members to have sex every day for a month.<sup>7</sup>

Is sex the new antidepressant? Numerous studies have shown that couples who are satisfied with their relationship are generally more satisfied with their sexual life and sexual functioning. Canadian sex researcher Lori Brotto says, 'Ultimately we all just want to love and be loved. If people are sexually happier, they'll be happier in general.' She adds that sex is a mood enhancer, and although many women dread it at times, they usually feel better for it afterwards. 'So really there is an antidepressant-like quality in something that is nonmedical, very natural.'



For many women, libido is something we used to have. In the beginning of our relationship . . . when we were younger . . . when we weighed less . . . Then we may have felt that fire, the urgency to touch and bond, spread our legs and be filled. Libido was like a magic wand that could turn sex into something euphoric. Sexual thoughts would come, unannounced, jagged and warm. We dressed to be seductive, and used our bodies to seduce.

But for many women, libido 'just went away'. It might have been a gradual decline where sex slowly lost prominence in the scale of life priorities. It might have happened suddenly, after the birth

of our first child. Either way, sexual vitality and interest became increasingly hard to summon, increasingly distant. And we were left feeling ‘sexless’.

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Libido, however, naturally fluctuates through out our lifetime, and varies in strength from woman to woman. Even though some women’s interest in sex is never very robust, the exception often occurs during *limerence*, the enchanted period of early love when sex is elevated to the realms of the divine. Limerence—the first months or years of a romance—this is when sexual desire peaks, not only because we are getting to know the most darling, amazing, delicious person on earth, but also because of the chemicals—dopamine, noradrenaline and testosterone—that surge through our bodies.

But what happens when there are children, and bills to pay, when we feel less physically desirable, when domesticity and boredom set in and those fabulous love chemicals are no longer zipping about? Some are left with companionate love that only occasionally hits the heights of sexual pleasure. But others are better able to tenure passion.

The lessening of our libido is in all likelihood a *natural* progression. Infatuation leads to pairing, which leads to less intensity as we rechannel sexual energy into other projects. But, there is a problem. We are living in a time when sex is the new gold and relationships that fall short are deemed not only inferior but sexually ‘dysfunctional’.

Low libido certainly doesn’t connote a sexual disorder. In fact, in the Victorian era, low libido was considered a virtue in women. But try telling that to hubby next time he complains. Of all the female sexual ‘ailments’, low libido is by far the most common. For many women, thinking about sex, desiring sex, initiating sex, languishing in sex is simply not part of regular life. Depending on the medical literature you read, the prevalence of low libido ranges from 25 to 43 per cent among American women.<sup>8</sup> The libido of ordinary women does not match the way it is depicted in film, television, music, women’s literature and magazines, advertising campaigns and pornography. But, because we are so exposed to this media ideal, our partners and eventually even we ourselves can start to believe that this is what our sexuality should also be like. Whether distal—the body language of a model advertising handbags—or proximal—the x-rated files on your boyfriend’s laptop—hyper-sexualised media represent women the same way: airbrushed, thin and horny. In the media story we should all have a flowing, abundant, liquid libido. Our lips should be perpetually glossed. We should be always in the mood and look as tantalising as we taste.

Is women’s desire in the Western world at an all-time low? Could it be that despite feminists’ efforts to gain sexual freedom we’re just . . . not that into it?

The gap between the libido of ordinary women and the libido of women presented in the media leads to the pathologisation of female sexuality—where low libido is seen as a ‘disease’. Women’s first line of defence is often to launch beautification projects to try to appear *desirable*. The divergence between our über-sexed public space and our sexually muted private lives also sets up an opening for drug companies and their pharmaceutical cures (see Chapter 6).

What is low libido, and why does desire wane?

Libido refers to our sexual drive, but also our general vigour and enthusiasm. Low libido leads to reduced interest in sex and reduced creative expression of our sexuality. However, rather than dissipating altogether, our libido often gets funnelled from sex into other areas of our life: Our careers can gobble that intense, heady focus. As can our homes, dinner tables and wardrobes. And most undoubtedly, a singular absorption with our children can supersede even the early, blossoming stage of limerence.

In other words, often it is not that our libido is low, but rather that our creative energy is being directed elsewhere, from seduction and carnality to more contained pursuits.

Hence the phenomenon of DINS, double income no sex, couples who are cashed up but sex poor. A surfeit of factors can influence the current of our sexual desire. Low libido relates to physical, psychological, interpersonal and wider cultural factors. It reflects our previous sexual history and whether we are single, newly in love, with a long-term partner, or a parent, and the extent of our satisfaction with these roles. It may reflect our body image, health, stress levels, hormones, emotional wellbeing, and expectations about sex and desire.

If your libido is not as high as you'd like it to be, here are some questions to explore. Is this low libido lifelong, or recently acquired? Are you or your partner bothered by it? Are you aware of its primary cause? Is your libido being funnelled into other areas of your life? Is your sexual self-esteem negatively affecting your libido? To what extent are you willing to boost your libido, or do competing demands or interests come first? And what would your ideal sexuality be like?

Molly, 31, lives in Vancouver, married, mother of a little girl

**Tell me about your desire.**

It would be really nice to be in the mood sometimes and actually initiate sex. But then I wonder, maybe I'm just not like that. I mean, once the newness of a relationship is over, when that excitement and mystery normalises, then you have irritations with your husband over not doing enough housework or spending enough time with our daughter, and it just really depletes any sex drive I might have had.

Do you think you'd see a doctor or healer about low libido?

I don't want to talk about it to anyone. I don't really believe in psychotherapy. I did once feel like acupuncture opened a sexual meridian or something. Afterwards I was working on the computer and suddenly felt like yay, I'm in the mood and went to look for my husband.

So for now will you just accept your level of desire as is?

Once my daughter's a bit older, once there's more time and sanity, then I'll be willing to look at other options. Right now I'll settle for lazy, infrequent sex at my husband's initiation.

Do you think your low levels of desire are only about being a mum?

I don't think so, although it's a big part of it.

Do you get upset about having a low sex drive?

I'm too tired to care. I know it's frustrating for my husband . . . Sometimes I feel like it's one aspect of my womanhood that I'm not in touch with and I feel like, yeah, that's part of me that hasn't been awakened yet and that is bothersome. And I do get a little envious of women who are way more in touch with sexuality and have healthy sexual hunger.

Where do you think your low sexual desire comes from?

Previous to my husband I haven't had healthy or passionate sexual experiences, and so when I first met my husband, I had to go through a lot of stuff. I was very uncomfortable in some positions, sometimes I started crying, there was a lot of healing in order. I feel like a lot has been put to rest, but at the same time I don't feel very confident in my sexuality and being a sexual being.

Would you take a drug to cure low libido?

I don't think so; I don't even take Tylenol [paracetamol]. It would be a really weighty decision for me.

**A young Australian woman with a long-term boyfriend says:**

I've come across women where sex is like a chore to put on the fridge beside mopping the floor. I'm not that bad. In general, I do want it, but I can't be bothered with everything that comes with initiating it, the effort involved . . . I guess I might be

physically lazy. I'm happy to take it, but I can't be bothered climbing on top. I'm just like, come and get me. It's the only way I enjoy it, otherwise I'm not interested.

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At the start of a relationship, that's all you want to do with the person. I think maybe I've had no interest in sex for five years, on and off. I go through phases. Also I find when I'm on a hormonal contraceptive, I really *don't* want it, so I'm not on them because I go psycho and I don't want sex, so there's no point going on them.

Lee, 31, lives in Melbourne with her partner and is a mother of two children in primary school.

My sex drive has always been poor. It's almost like it's switched off. It doesn't feel normal. I don't feel like my whole body is engaged in sex. I feel like I have to work harder to get to the levels you need to reach to get enjoyment and it should be the opposite: the more you relax the more you're in the moment. I'm just not turned on.

Of the various factors that impinge upon our libido, there is often physical, psychological and sociocultural overlap.

### **Physical inhibitors: the uninterested body**

A range of physical factors can dampen our libido. These include conditions such as anaemia (common in women because of iron loss during periods), kidney failure, hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland) and diabetes, which may make arousal and orgasm difficult.<sup>9</sup> Hyperprolactinaemia—a rare disorder in which the pituitary gland is overactive—also diminishes libido, as can the use of some medications, including certain antidepressants. Ironically, the same device that enables us to have spontaneous sex—the contraceptive pill—if containing the hormone progestin, may lower libido for some women.<sup>10</sup> Alcohol or drug abuse can also alter sexual wellbeing and libido.

Some other conditions that can cause changes in female sexual desire include menopause, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse), infections such as thrush or urinary tract infections, and vaginismus—the involuntary clamping of the vaginal muscles, which makes penetration difficult, if not impossible. Pregnancy and breastfeeding also alter our hormone levels and object of focus.

The effects of hormones on female desire are covered in greater depth later, but we should note here that male sexual desire is also prone to the winds of change. Conditions that can cause a decline in male libido include age-related testosterone loss, impotence (the failure to achieve or sustain an erection sufficient for intercourse) and premature ejaculation.

### **Psychological inhibitors: the problematic mind**

In the histories of women with low libido, a number of factors tend to recur. Many women reveal sexual negative family attitudes. Others have undergone traumatic experiences such as sexual harassment, molestation, abuse or assault.

Depression can cause lethargy, lack of motivation and withdrawal from activities including sex. Stress hormones can also reduce sexual desire and response. Work stress, financial stress and everyday worries draw us away from sensual living, and it is common for women to feel too tired for sex.

Lucille, 39, lives in Sydney, married, owns online retail business, mother of two daughters aged 2 and 4

Tell me about your libido.

It's pretty non-existent. It's very, very rare that I ever really think about doing it, and usually if I do think about it it's if I had a sexy dream. I'm more interested in sex when I'm asleep than when I'm awake.

I've even wondered, am I a lesbian or something, because I used to be more sexually active than most women. I've had lots of partners and stuff, and now it's just completely died.

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Do you think your sexual desire has died off because of having young kids?

It isn't the kids. And it's not my husband either. I sometimes look at my husband and think yum, because he's really attractive . . . Even when we do have sex, it's fantastic. Maybe I've just gotten really lazy . . . I used to be a really active participant and now I can't be bothered . . . And I wish I could be. I feel bad for my husband; he never complains.

Could tiredness be affecting your sex drive?

Well, I am really tired, but I don't see that as an excuse. How long is an average sex session? It takes longer to drink a cup of coffee, really. I don't buy that. I definitely think there's something in the way. I don't use the too-tired excuse—I mean I do use it with my husband, but I don't really believe it.

How about sexual esteem—does the way you feel about your body affect your libido?

No. Look, I have changed since I met my husband. I've put on 20 kilos, but I'm not self-conscious with him, and he's the only man I haven't been really self-conscious in front of. I'm confident that he's attracted to me, because I know he never looks at me with a critical eye. When I was 20 kilos less, some men would say I was too fat.

Perhaps because you are so confident, you feel you don't need to work to keep his attention?

My last long-term partner always told me I was overweight. I think he had the power over me. But I have the power over my husband, so I make him work for it.

Additionally, sharing a home with parents—or worse yet, parents-in-law—has a way of dampening desire. And nothing dampens libido like a toddler, or domestic drudgery, which may explain why one survey found that the majority of women would prefer their husbands to Hoover rather than hold them.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, over 30 per cent of women in a British survey claimed that cleaning gave them more satisfaction than sex!<sup>12</sup>

For many women, emotional closeness is a prelude to sex. A lack of or decrease in sex drive can indicate ongoing relationship issues such as lack of communication or trust, unresolved conflicts or fighting, and poor communication of sexual needs or desires. Issues from our childhood or previous intimate relationships can also affect current feelings about sex and sexuality.

Although libido is usually strong during courtship, desire often dissipates. And were the discerning eye more observant during courtship, one would notice that even then desire was likely more in the hands of one than the other; that there was an unambiguous pursuer, and the one who responded. Initially, these inequitable libidos were part of what gave the relationship dynamic friction and oomph. But after limerence passes, we are no longer left with what the vision of first love promised.

If both parties are satisfied with a shift from romance to companionship, there's nothing much to worry about, continue planting your veggie patch, working on your golf swing or blog. But in most cases desire becomes unequal. Uneven. One wants more. The other is happy with less, or none at all. One longs, attempts, advances, the other thwarts, withdraws. A difference between two people's desire levels is referred to as 'desire discrepancy'. Dealing with mismatched sex drives is often difficult for a couple. Subterranean thoughts seep into the relationship . . . resentments, not feeling understood, not feeling desired . . . a sense that your true self is not being recognised . . . guilt that you're not able to satisfy her. Or him. Desire discrepancies can lead to conflicts, a greater lack of desire for sex, and eventually to adultery or separation.

It appears that many women make a great deal of effort to be seductive during the courtship and early relationship phases, then ease off as the relationship becomes more established. Some take their sexual life for granted and become sensually inattentive. At some point we may need to acknowledge

that attitude can be a primary reason for low libido and that an effort is necessary to bring sex back.

Indeed, when it came to sex, many of the Australian interviewees used the expression that they 'couldn't be bothered'. One factor in some women's lowered sex drive is over-confidence of their partner's affections. Sure that their partner is loyal, they feel no need to use libido to maintain his interest. Because there is no gap to bridge, she makes no effort. With the chase over, she has nothing to prove.

It strikes me that we are absent of a script. Rom-Coms and women's literature seem to be all about *finding* love, not tending to it.

As we are single for longer before marriage, with many of us experimenting with different partners we learn to be self-reliant, and our sexuality is tied up with our solo persona. Generally, the media focus on sex in terms of being single and in the quest for fulfillment, chasing and being chased. If sex is generally understood in the context of securing a partner, what happens next? How does love work when you have been together for years and years? What role does sex play within the dynamic of monogamy? The truth is that long-term monogamy and parenthood alter us, unsettle our previously built sexual personas. With the game itself changed, it's not just reappropriation or rechanneling of our energy that is called for but a *redefining* of our sexual selves.

### **Sociocultural inhibitors**

Gender, religion, culture and the media shape our ideas about monogamy, premarital sex, non-reproductive sex, contraception, homosexuality, male and female sexual roles, what is good and bad sexual behaviour, and whether or not light bondage is a good way to spend an afternoon. Guilt and sexual shame can have a debilitating impact on libido—although taboos can also add a sexual charge. The contraception now widely available to Western women has had an enormous impact on our sexual freedom and creative sexual expression, but it seems to have contributed to the myth that our libido should be perpetually hot, and eager? In societies where women lack ready access to birth control, safe, legal abortion and sexual health checks, women are also more likely to associate sex with danger and to receive harsh punishments if they do not accord to local gender rules.

As we have seen, low sexual self-esteem negatively impacts female libido, as does the multiple roles of modern women: wife, career woman, mummy, domestic goddess, friend, and, of course, sex bomb. Culture colours all aspects of the above, shaping our sexual preferences, desires, fears and practices.

Interestingly, research shows that once in a secure relationship, a woman's sex drive begins to plummet.<sup>13</sup> An interview-based German study found that, four years into a relationship, less than half of 30-year-old women desired regular sex. After 20 years the rate dropped to 20 per cent. Men's libido, on the other hand, remained pretty constant. Oh how predictable.

Adopting an evolutionary approach to explain this, the lead author of the study argued that men's steady libido is designed to discourage female infidelity, whereas women's charged sex drive at the beginning of a relationship allows her to bond with a partner and, once this is established—think ring babies, joint Facebook account—her sexual appetite can safely decline. Plus, if her interest in sex is only sporadic, the relative value of sex with her is heightened, further enticing the man she has partnered with. Human beings, after all, generally desire that which is not in infinite supply. Like the next iPhone.

The seemingly greater consistency of men's desire may be partly due to biology, but it also reflects



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