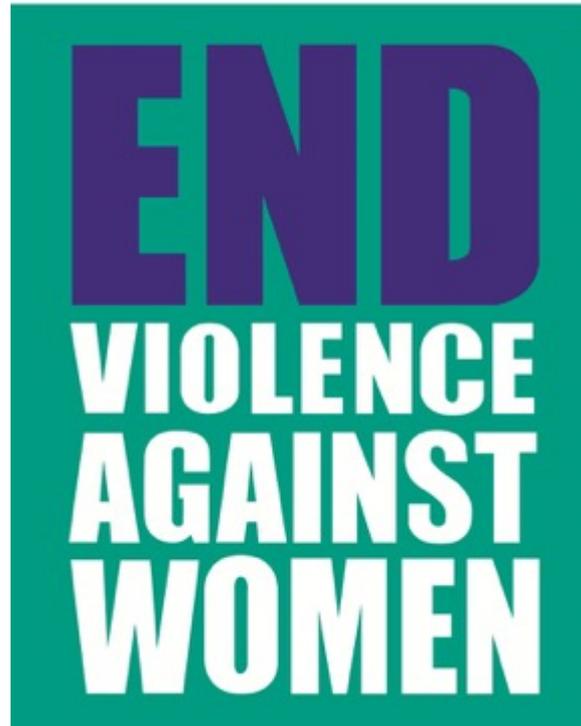


“Let’s Talk About Sex...”

A short report on public attitudes to sexual ethics and behavior



A Report by the End Violence Against Women Coalition examining the sexism and stereotypes society holds around sexual practice

August 2019

About the ERAW Coalition

The End Violence Against Women Coalition (‘ERAW’) is a UK-wide coalition of women’s organisations and allies working to end violence against women and girls in all its forms, including: sexual violence, domestic violence, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, FGM, stalking and harassment, on and offline. We campaign for better national and local government responses to all forms of this abuse, and we campaign to challenge the wider cultural attitudes in society that minimize or make excuses for it. The ERAW Coalition is a company limited by guarantee (no. 7317881) and a registered charity (no. 1161132).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Fiona Vera Gray for her generous input and advice on this research. ERAW staff drafted the text based on the YouGov quantitative survey and three focus group transcripts and summary.

Contents

About ERAW, Acknowledgements & Contents	p2
Executive Summary and Key Findings	p3
Who are the ERAW Coalition and why and how did we do this research?	p5
Detailed findings	p7
What does this research tell us and why does it matter?	p19
Recommendations	p22

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key statistical findings (3922 GB adults)

Who needs and wants sex?

- A third of people (32%) believe that men need sex more than women, whereas 54% believe men and women need sex about the same amount (1% believe women need sex more)
- 42% of people believe men want sex more than women do, whereas 45% believe men and women want sex about the same amount (2% believe women want sex more)

Who initiates, orgasms during and decides when sex is finished between heterosexual couples?

- People mostly think (45%) that heterosexual sex is slightly more likely to be initiated by the man, closely followed by either partner (42%). Just 3% think it is initiated by the woman (just 3%)
- More than half of people (53%) think that men are more likely to orgasm in sex, compared to around a third (35%) thinking both partners are likely to orgasm
- Around a third of people (36%) think it is likely that the man will decide when sex is finished, and a similar proportion of 38% think it's as likely to be either partner, and 11% thinking it will be the woman

Who might refuse sex, or go along with sex 'to keep their partner happy' between heterosexual partners?

- The majority of people (56%) think that the woman is more likely to refuse sex; 25% believe that both partners are as likely to refuse; while only 1% of people think men are more likely to refuse sex
- The majority of people (57%) think women are more likely to 'go along with sex to keep their partner happy'; whereas almost a quarter (23%) think that both partners are as likely to do this; and only 2% consider men more likely to do so
- More women (63%) than men (50%) think that women are more likely to go along with sex to keep their partners happy.

Is sex likely to be enjoyable? Are there generational differences?

- Almost three quarters (73%) of people believe both partners are as likely to enjoy themselves in heterosexual sex. But this figure reduces amongst 18-24 year olds to 58%.

What we think this means and why it matters

While it is welcome to find that a large majority of people (73%) believe that men and women are equally likely to enjoy heterosexual sex, most of the findings reveal deep and entrenched sexist ideas about sex.

Even after decades of challenge to these ideas, many people think that generally speaking, men need and want sex more than women do, and large numbers believe it is more likely

that in heterosexual couples men initiate, orgasm during and decide when sex is finished than women. In contrast, women are believed to be much more likely to 'go along with sex to keep their partner happy', to refuse sex and not to orgasm.

This reads strongly as a persistence of the idea for many people that sex is more "for" men than women, with men's needs and pleasure centred and women's pleasure and orgasm more secondary.

There is also a clear "orgasm gap" where the male orgasm is regarded as an intrinsic part of heterosexual sex but women's climax is regarded perhaps as more elusive and hard to reach. When there is a lesser expectation of sexual pleasure for women, combined with the idea that women are less motivated in the first place but may just 'go along with it', women not enjoying sex as much as men can be 'normalised' and a self-fulfilling stereotype.

The views of young adults in the survey (aged 18-24) were consistently strikingly quite different from the rest of the population. Far from being the most 'progressive', they are the most likely to believe that men are more likely to enjoy sex and to orgasm in heterosexual relations. This needs further investigation and certainly raises questions about the impact of pornography as a default sex educator.

The sexist ideas about sex that we identify from the research can be a basis for some men developing a sense of greater entitlement to sex and the excusing or minimizing of men pestering or pushing women for sex. The combination of the ideas that men want/need sex more, and that women are much more likely to refuse sex add up to a toxic status for women as "gatekeepers" of sex. This gatekeeper responsibility on women alone can drip feed into some of the myths and stereotypes about rape, which we discuss further below.

This entrenched sexism about sex matters intrinsically when we consider women's and men's happiness and fulfilment in their intimate relationships. But it also matters when we consider what is going wrong in a society that is utterly failing to deter, reduce and prevent rape, if sexist stereotypes about consensual sex feed the myths which excuse and minimize sexual assault. These ideas can be part of why reported rape prosecutions fail as police and prosecutors decide they can't build a case where a jury will see a woman who 'failed to gatekeep'. They are related to the BMJ research this year which found that almost half of young people report that their first sexual experience was bad, and much more so for young women than young men, and with BME girls most likely to have felt this (see references).

And, these ideas are in play when schools don't know where to start with high levels of sexual harassment and assault and sometimes switch to blaming 'hypersexualised' girls and their too short skirts. These sexist ideas underpin image-based abuse where it is very predominantly women who are 'shamed' for being sexual, and where a Muslim Women's Network report recently appealed for police to take better care to understand the seriousness of perpetrators threatening to shame Muslim women and girls in these cases. Sexist, misogynistic and racist ideas about sex are reproduced on a mass scale in mainstream pornography which, for the male user gaze, turns continuously on narratives about women 'gatekeepers' who give in.

We believe this research is important and timely as attitudes to sexual equality and to sexual violence are debated and are changing. We need to ask ourselves where sexist ideas about sex come from and what impacts they have. Who do they serve? Why do many men not feel ‘accountable’ for or expected to check in on their partner’s pleasure, and to what extent do women feel silenced around asserting their desire for pleasure? How can we change this and get to a better place for men and women?

We are publishing the data on our website and encourage people to take it up and be part of the ‘big social conversation’ we need on this. We urge professionals in all relevant fields to join the conversation, and we urge media makers, influencers and artists to tell stories and platform conversations about sexism and sex. Sex education in schools could be so much better in this area, but we need those who are already adults to speak out too.

This short report is based on the findings from a large quantitative survey and three subsequent online focus groups (1.5 hours in duration), which were commissioned from YouGov in September 2018 by the EAW Coalition. The survey was with 3922 GB adults and the three online Focus Groups were with 6-9 respondents per group. The three groups were made up of women aged 50+, women aged 18-49, and men of mixed age. The report is an analysis by the EAW Coalition of the quant data and the focus groups summary analysis and transcripts as supplied by YouGov. It is the EAW Coalition’s interpretation of the survey findings based on our many years of policy work and campaigning around violence against women and girls and equalities.

Who are The End Violence Against Women Coalition and why did we do this research?

The End Violence Against Women Coalition includes frontline specialist support services, researchers, lawyers, survivors and activists working together to end violence against women and girls in all its forms. We campaign for better government responses to all forms of gender based violence, and we campaign to challenge the wider cultural attitudes in society that minimize or make excuses for it.

We are living in a time of enormous change in attitudes towards sexual violence with more survivors than ever before reporting rape to the police (up more than 150% over five years) and seeking help from therapeutic support services. Following revelations about high profile abusers, the #MeToo movement, and many survivors speaking out in public spaces about their experiences, there is a live and constant discussion about sexual assault, and what causes it and what should be done to prevent it.

Many women’s organisations see sexual violence in all its forms, including sexual harassment, physical sexual assault, rape and image-based abuse, as taking place across a continuum, where women and girls are aware from a young age that they may be subjected to any of these by men they do and do not know, simply because they are female. Sexual violence is “a cause and a consequence” of gender inequality, committed by individuals but enabled by patriarchal structures including a justice system that fails to protect women and girls from sexual violence, and a constant reproduction of media and cultural messages

which make excuses for, or minimize, sexual abuse. BME women and girls, those living in poverty and those who are disabled face even higher levels of impunity when sexual violence is committed against them, and are subjected to racist tropes, disbelief and stereotyping as a way to dismiss their experiences. Younger women and girls are subjected to extremely high levels of sexual abuse and harassment which should be at the top of policy makers' agendas.

As part of our long-term work campaigning for better access to justice and support services for survivors of sexual violence, we commissioned YouGov to conduct some public attitudes research on attitudes towards rape and consent which we published in December 2018.

Having looked at the deeper drivers of sexual violence and the significant impunity around it, and at the myths and stereotypes which persist around rape and who 'typical' victims and perpetrators are, we decided to also investigate public views on consensual sex and sexual pleasure. What are the assumptions and stereotypes we hold as a society around sex and who wants it, what goes where and when it finishes? We wanted to then examine these perceived social norms about sex and pleasure, with the understanding that stereotypes can be self-fulfilling, and look at how they relate to sexism and to inequality broadly. We are interested to examine to what extent sexist stereotypes about sex may create a 'conductive context' for sexual violence to be both enabled and excused.

We are making the findings available on our website and encourage people to read and share them widely and engage with the findings and commentate on them and use them to get conversations going about sexism and sex.

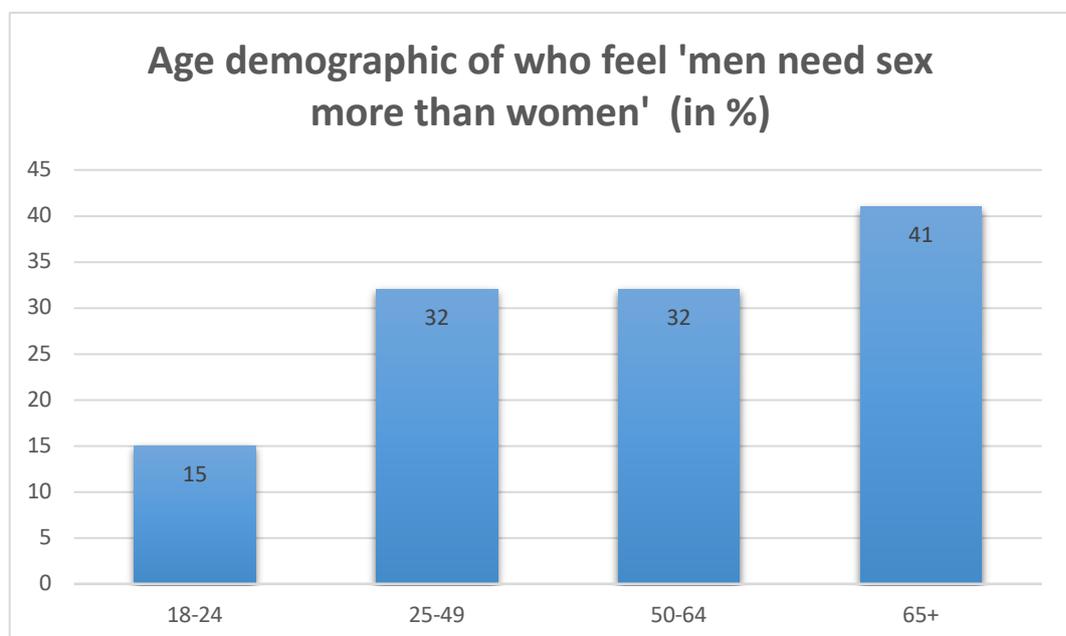
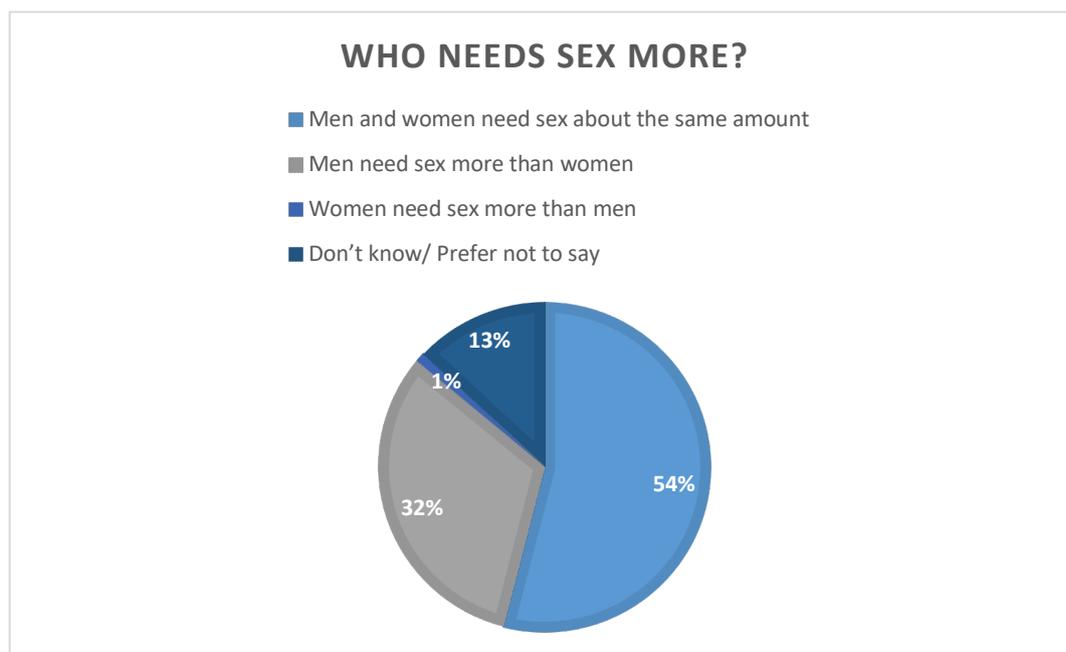
How did we do this research?

This research was produced in collaboration with YouGov, with almost 4,000 respondents in GB aged 18+ and three online focus groups – one of women aged 50+, one of women aged 18 – 49 and a third with men of mixed ages. It shows worrying attitudes about sex, consent and who gets to decide what happens when. The questions focused largely on heterosexual experiences between a man and a woman. The demographics are also limited and not encompassing of all identities and characteristics. It should be stressed that the survey asked what respondents consider to be the norm – not their own personal experiences. The quantitative data gave us broad insights into sexual stereotypes, whereas the focus groups helped us to understand more about what the data tells us.

Detailed Findings

Need for, and want of, sex

While just over half of the people surveyed (54%) believe that, generally speaking, men and women need sex equally, almost a third (32%) believe that men need sex more than women.



This idea that men “need” sex is commonplace. References to men having a more powerful biological drive for sex, linked to procreation, as well as vivid descriptions of discomfort caused to men if they are unable to attain sexual satisfaction underpin much of societal

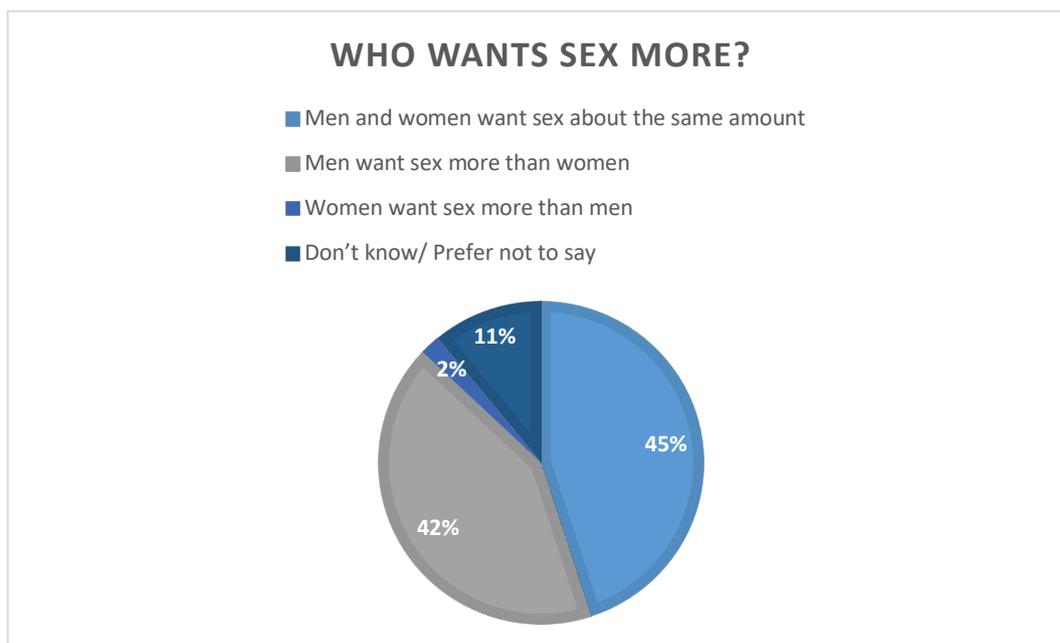
norms around sex. This school of thought feeds the idea that men “can’t help themselves” and are somehow less responsible for their actions, and that their lack of responsibility and consideration in sexual engagements can be excused as beyond their control. We see how this can link to it being accepted that men will be persistent, that they will push to get their “needs” met. As a male respondent in the focus groups stated, “There are no grey area with males they see what they can get away with”. If a man believes he needs sex more than women than he, and wider society, can use this to justify such behaviours and legitimise their sense of entitlement to sex.

The findings also revealed a significant generational shift – 41% of over 65s are convinced men generally ‘need more sex’ while just 15% of 18-24s feel the same way. This raises interesting questions as to what younger generations have been exposed to, and could signify a positive shift in understanding the sexual agency of women. However, it could also be linked to media representations and pornography which portrays women as hyper-sexualised, and ever willing and seeking of sexual pleasure. Especially when considered with other survey results which show that 18-24 year olds, much more than their older counterparts, consider that men are more likely to orgasm in heterosexual sex (63% to 50% of men aged 50+), and consider it less likely that both partners are interested in their partner’s pleasure (49% to 63% of men aged 50+).

Striking here is the fact that where it is recognised that sex is needed, generally, more by men, or by both partners equally, almost none (1%) of the survey respondents considered sex as being wanted or needed more by women. This speaks to what is threaded throughout the survey findings – that sex isn’t seen as being something a woman needs, wants, or enjoys as much as men.

Also interesting here is the gender breakdown of the response. More women (37%) than men (27%) consider that men “need” sex more, implying this notion is more strongly held amongst females, ie men don’t think they need sex as much as women think they do; however a majority of both genders think that men and women need sex about the same (58% male, 51% female). Survey respondents were commenting on what they think other people think and do, not their own personal experiences directly. EVAW think there may be an internal understanding amongst women of their own actual needs and desires while also reflecting and answering with respect to what they understand other people’s norms to be (this comes of course from knowledge of friends’ and family’s lives, as well as broader more abstract ideas from media and culture for example). We should consider that this in particular may lead women to actively engage with the myth of men not being able to control themselves and women therefore being wholly responsible for preventing access to their bodies.

Other demographic breakdowns illustrated that Christians were also more likely than other religious groups to consider men need sex more than women, as well as 11% more of white respondents, compared to BME respondents (but please note the smaller sample sizes of these demographics).



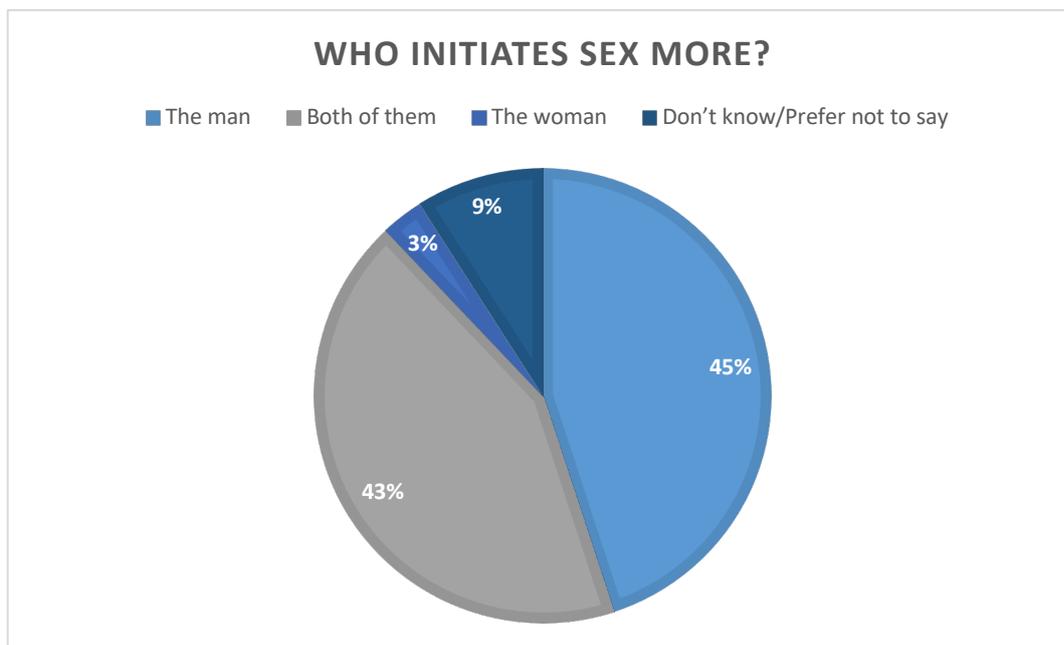
When it comes to who *wants* sex on a general level, people are more split. Almost half (45%) of people surveyed believed men and women want sex the same amount, and close to the same number believed that men want sex more than women (42%). The amount who think women want more sex than men is 2%. This suggests, as discussed above, that sex is something for both the man and woman together, *or* for the man alone. But it is not for the woman alone.

The focus groups discussed a number of factors that contribute to one's libido, with participants specifically mentioning biology, followed by culture, history, life stage / age, schedule, and health. In terms of biological factors, women cited that pregnancy and the menopause as contributors to wanting sex – it was considered that the ramifications for women from sex are a lot more serious if “you are left holding the baby”. All three focus groups (but primarily older women and men) commented that men are, by nature, expected to have higher sex drives and desire sex more frequently. All three groups acknowledged that men are generally expected to be ‘hypersexual’ but they also admitted that it is not unnatural for a woman to have a high sex drive.

One reason repeatedly cited by women in the focus groups for being less interested in sex was tiredness and exhaustion. Two of the groups referred to sex being just an act for men whereas women require more of an emotional connection.

It was felt that some ‘Victorian values’ still remain in society, and that a double standard exists for women who are more open about sex. They stressed that historically women have not been able to express their sexuality – that it was not deemed acceptable and they were judged more harshly. Though women in the focus groups indicated that this was shifting. Heterosexual women with high sex drives are however still seen as the ‘gold standard’ for their male partner, but simultaneously labelled ‘cheap’ by society for being sex-positive / liberal when they are not in a relationship.

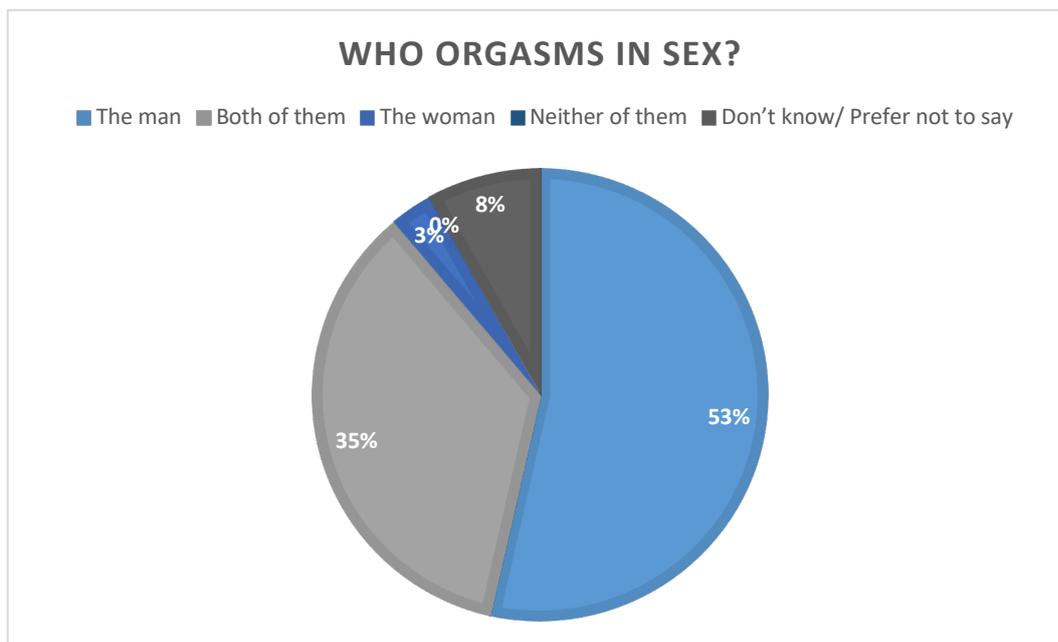
Who initiates sex



The majority of people (45%) think that, for heterosexual couples, sex is most likely to be initiated by the man. A similar amount (42%) believe that sex is initiated jointly by both men and women, but just 3 percent believe that the woman is more likely to initiate sex. Women are slightly more likely than men to believe sex is initiated equally (46% to 39%). 18-24 year olds are the only age group to believe it is more likely that sex is initiated mutually than that it is initiated by men.

In the focus groups – both men and women – referred to women being the seducers, not the proactive ones who initiate sex. There was an idea that while women may want sex they leave it to the man to bring it up. This may link to the judgment around female sexuality and the restrictions placed on women historically, and the risks women have run of being ostracised and shamed for naming or acting on their sexual desires.

Who orgasms in sex?



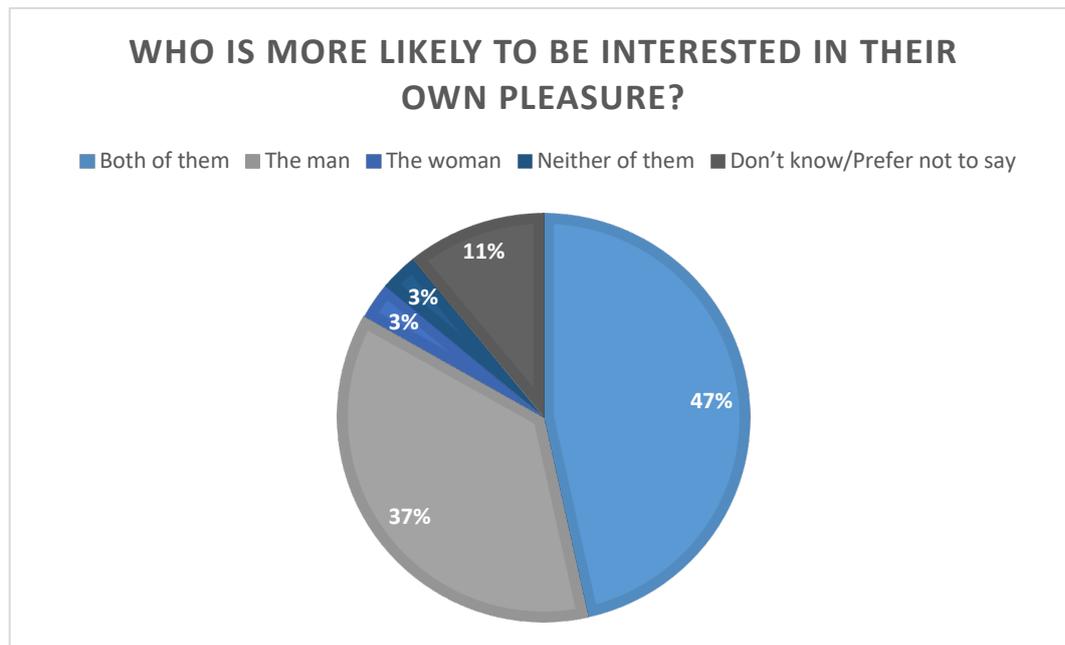
Over half (53%) of people believe that men are more likely to orgasm in heterosexual sex than their partners. While just over a third (35%) believe men and woman are equally likely to orgasm.

53% of men and 54% of women believe men are more likely to orgasm in sex. This parity across genders indicates the majority of women believe that men are more likely to orgasm than they are in heterosexual intercourse.

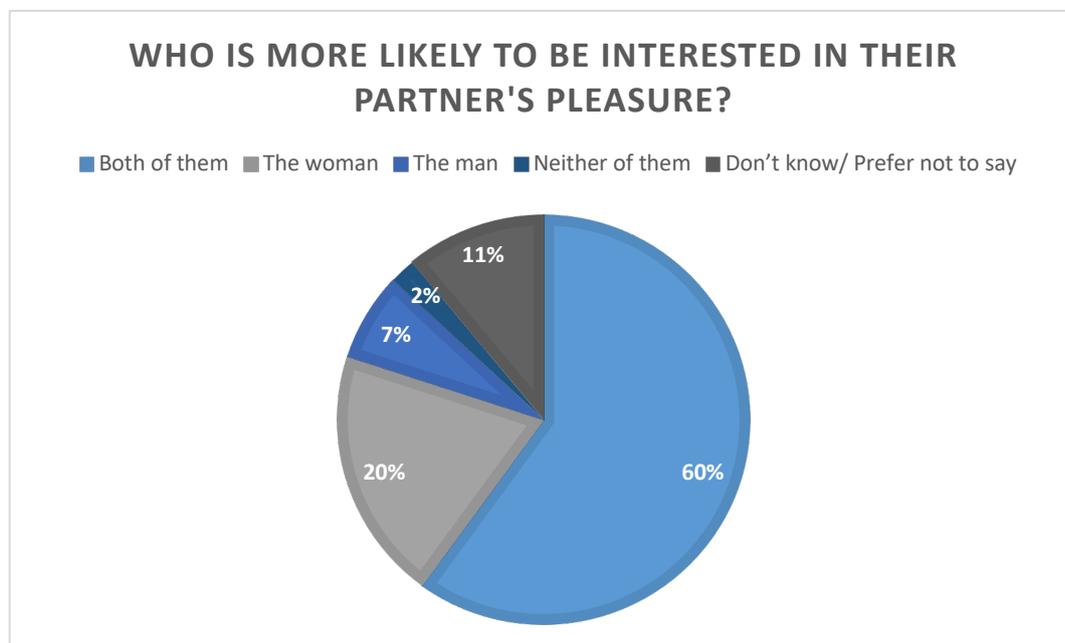
The generational shift in perceptions of men's likelihood to orgasm is extremely notable. Almost two thirds of 18 – 24 year olds (63% compared to 50% of 50+) believe that men are more likely to orgasm. This could be a reflection of the increased consumption of pornography across this age group, a huge industry predominantly aimed at men and their masturbation where the focus of the content is generally centered around the man's pleasure and climax. It may also be symptomatic of the types of sexual experiences this age group are having.

Only 3 percent believe the woman is more likely to orgasm. A woman in the focus group put forward that men think that orgasms are intrinsic to the enjoyment of sex, though for women it may not be a pre-requisite for enjoyment. This is reflected in the figures around enjoyment of sex, where 75% of women feel that both partners are likely to enjoy sex, despite recognising they are less likely to orgasm.

Pleasure and enjoyment of sex



Just under half (47%) of people consider that men and women are both interested in their own pleasure during heterosexual sex. However, 37% - just over a third – believe that men are more interested in their own pleasure. This figure is consistent from both men and women – meaning men also think their gender is more interested in their own pleasure. Whereas only 3% overall think that a woman is more interested in her own pleasure.

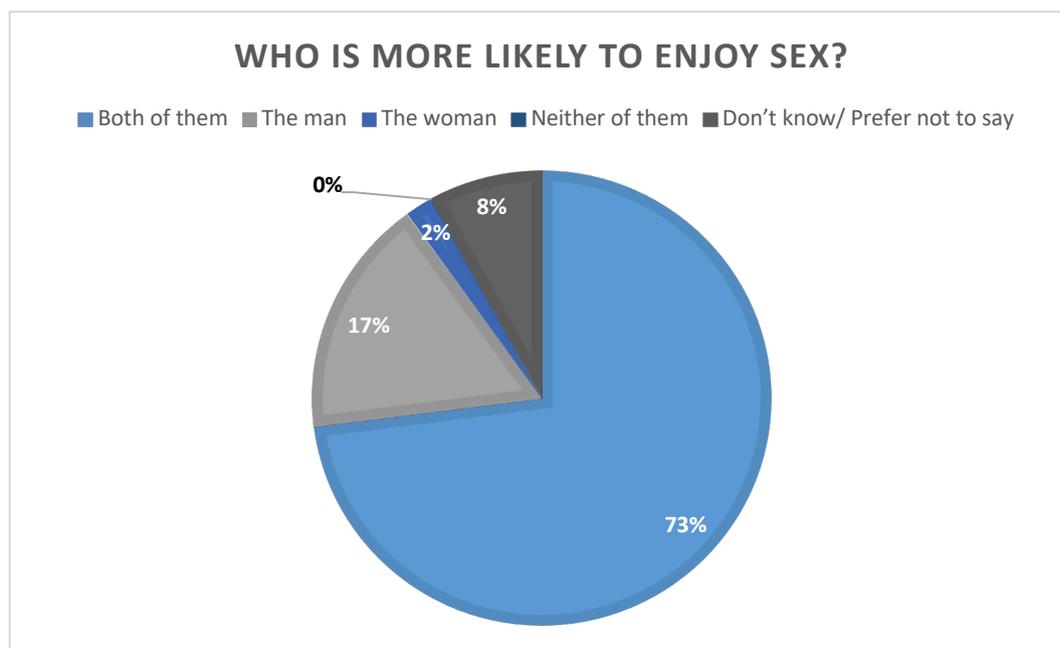


The majority of people (60%) think that men and women are equally interested in their partner's pleasure during heterosexual sex. A fifth of people questioned (20%) consider that women are more likely to be interested in their partner's pleasure. This is connected to the theory of women existing as 'gatekeepers' who grant access to their bodies for men's

pleasure. These findings reflect the idea that women’s main concern is not their own orgasm but the man’s pleasure. In fact slightly more women than men think that women are more interested in their partner’s pleasure (23% to 17%). Focus group discussion implied that this could be linked to women stereotypically taking on more caring roles, being very occupied on a daily basis with much more unpaid labour than men and especially significantly more time spent looking after children or other dependents, leading to greater tiredness and less time spent thinking and looking forward to one’s own needs and desires.

Only 7% of people consider that men are more likely to be interested in their partner’s pleasure.

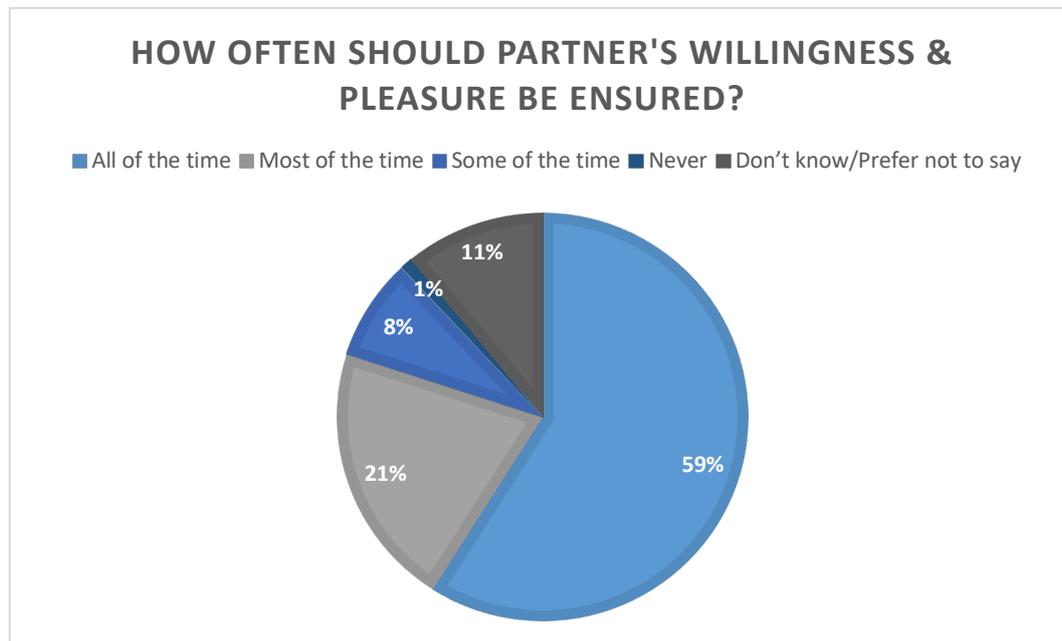
18-24 year olds are less likely to think that both partners are interested in their partner’s pleasure compared to those aged 50 and above (49% to 63%) and more likely to think that women are interested in their partner’s pleasure (29% to 18%). The implication here is that it is seen as less mutual, and more of a self-serving activity. This shift away from mutual pleasure could perhaps be read as this generation seeing sex as a way to bring oneself pleasure more than give pleasure to a partner.



Almost three quarters of people (73%) think that both partners in heterosexual sex enjoy themselves. Almost a fifth (17%) think that men are more likely than women to enjoy sex. Only 2% of people think that women enjoy sex more than men. Women are more likely to think it is both partners who enjoy sex (75% to 70%). This finding is heartening – a clear large majority believe most men and women are enjoying sex, despite believing there are gatekeeping and pleasure factors that are unequal. This could also be investigated further to find out what drives enjoyment.

18-24 years olds are less likely to think that both partners enjoy sex (58% to 75%) compared to those aged 65 and over. This youngest age group considers more likely that men enjoy sex more (28% to 14% of 50- 64s). There is a marked shift between the attitudes of 18-24 year olds and the remaining age groups which are very similar. In contrast to the cross-

population figures, this reflects quite a depressing perception as to the enjoyment of sex across this younger generation and needs further investigation.

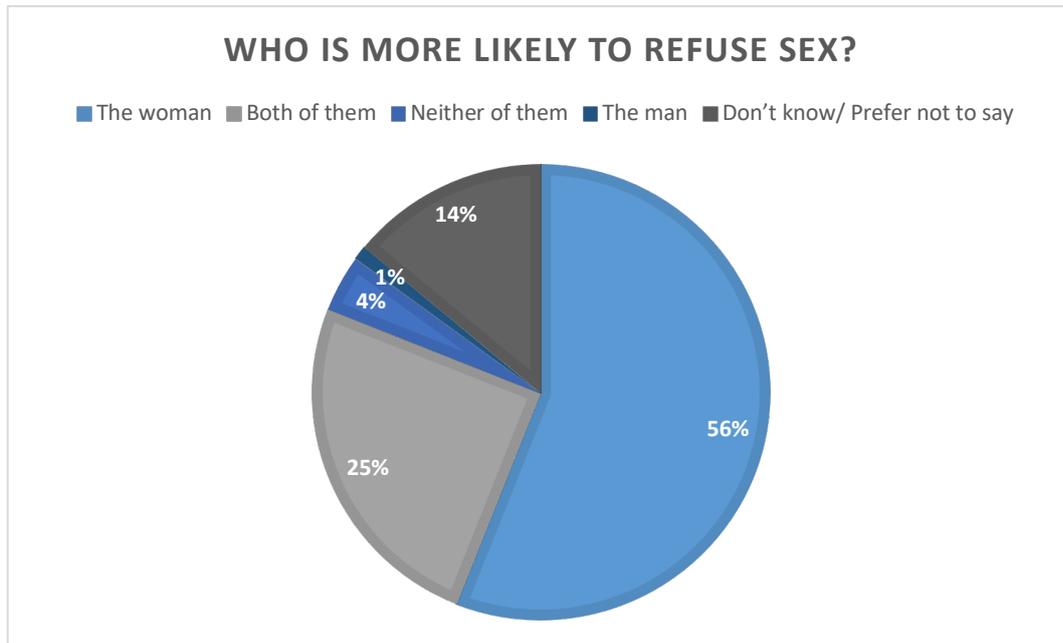


The majority of people (59%) think a person should ensure their partner is actively willing to have sex and gets pleasure from having sex every time. 21% think this should happen most of the time. 8% think it only needs to happen some of the time. 1% considered this was never need to be ensured. This question attempts to deal with two different elements in one – making it harder to define what element the respondents are responding to – the willingness, the pleasure or both?

There is no gender difference across the responses here. However, 18-24 years olds are more likely to think ensuring active willingness and pleasure of their partner should always be ensured (66%); this decreases steadily to 54% of 65+ age group. This can be seen as younger generations being told that sex is mutual, pleasurable and enjoyable.

In the focus groups all participants agreed that both men and women should receive pleasure from sex. Both genders felt that, in long-term relationships, it is easier to guarantee the pleasure of their partner, as sex becomes a familiar act and both parties are aware of the expectations, and that there is a degree of learning what works, and getting to know what the other likes best.

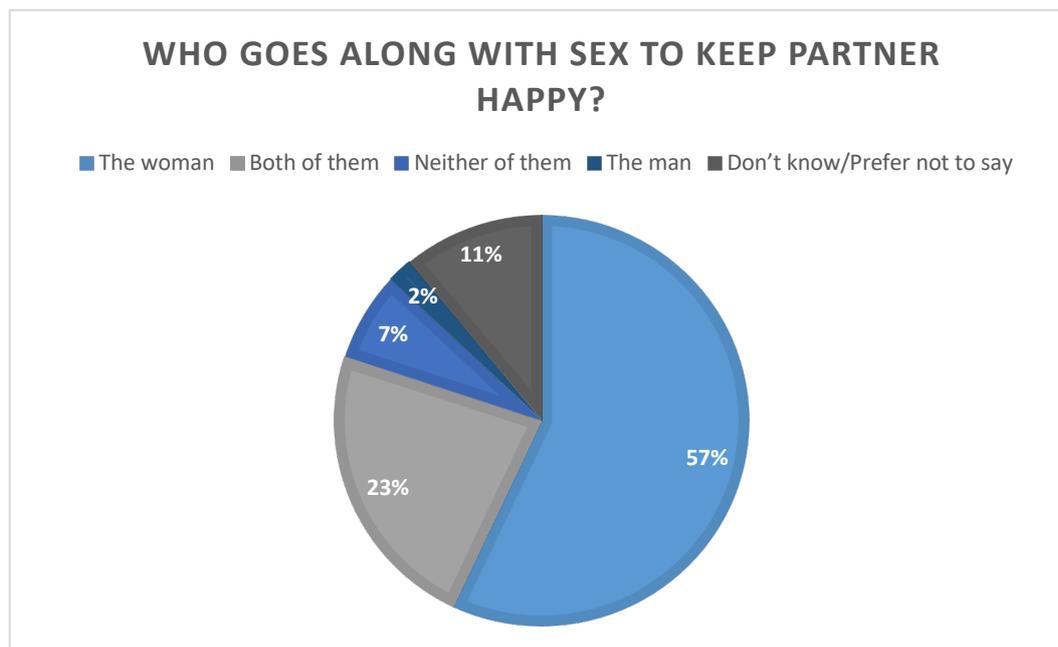
Who refuses sex?



The majority of people (56%) think that women are more likely to refuse sex. A quarter of people (25%) consider that both men and women are equally likely to refuse sex. Only 1% of people think men are more likely to refuse sex whilst 4% don't think either are likely to refuse sex. These perceptions are held equally by both men and women, and across the age demographics.

EVAW believes this consensus that it is women whose role it is to refuse sex, can mean a responsibility is placed on the woman to manage the sexual interactions. She becomes the “gatekeeper” of her body, and men’s access to it. These findings clearly point to the idea that it is men’s role to want sex and to experience pleasure, whereas it is the woman’s role to go along with it or refuse it. Woman’s pleasure is not centered in people’s perception of sexual norms; she is the granter or refuser of sexual interactions – that is her position. This has potentially enormous implications (below).

Who goes along with sex?



The majority of people (57%) think women are more likely to go along with sex to keep their partner happy. Almost a quarter (23%) think that both partners are likely to go along with sex to keep their partner happy whereas only 2% consider men more likely to do so.

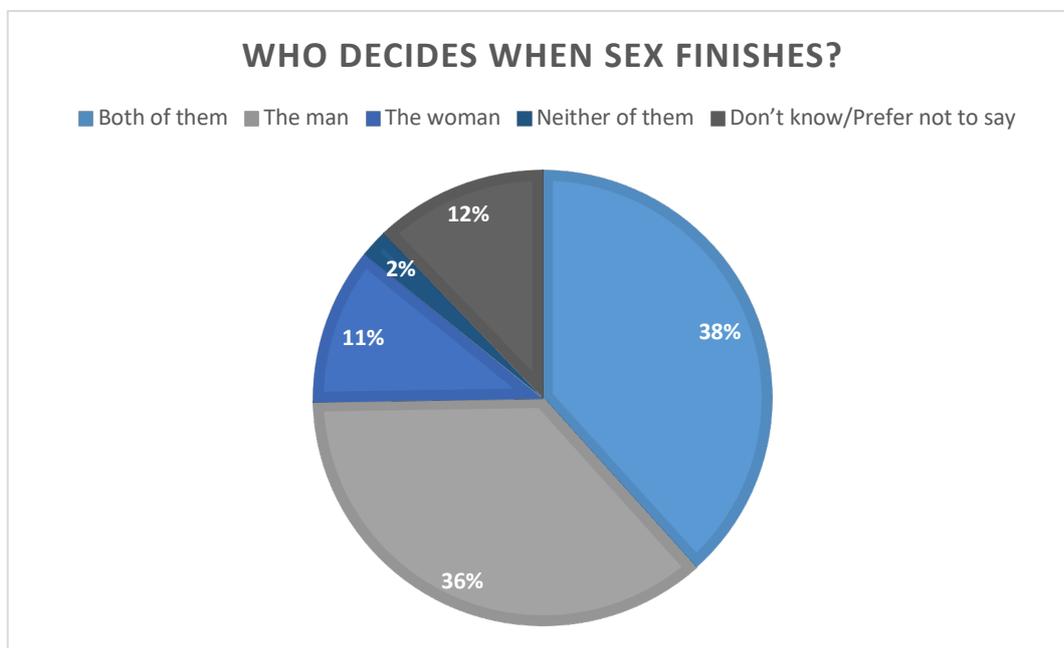
More women (63%) than men (50%) think that women are more likely to go along with sex to keep their partners happy. This may indicate that while men consider this a common phenomenon they actually underestimate the extent to which it is happening, and aren't aware of the extent women are just going along to keep their partners happy.

18-24 year olds are more likely to think that both partners would go along with sex to keep their partner happy compared to other age groups (27% compared to 18% of 65+). In the focus groups some women spoke of feeling “duty bound” once a man had an erection for him to reach climax. Some women also spoke of a sense of pressure placed on them – expectations they felt they should live up to. Some within the female groups commented that, even now, married women are still expected to cater to their husband’s sexual desires, and ‘do what [he] wants’ – although they acknowledged that this expectation is changing. Some of the older female participants commented that there was previously a culture of ‘lying back and thinking of England’ within marriages, where wives would often just go along with sex in order to keep their partner happy. The fear of losing their partner due to lack of sex was mentioned frequently, as was *“going along with it for a quiet life and no arguments”*.

‘The quiet life’, cited multiple times in the focus groups, hints at the idea of consequences if sex is not “granted”. Arguments were cited in the focus groups as likely consequences – an encompassing word for interactions which can include emotional or verbal abuse and physical violence. What does this mean for women when they refuse sex? It is important to consider whether women always feel safe and able to refuse sex and how going along with

it can sometimes feel like the safer option, as there is less risk of the situation turning uncomfortable or unpredictable, or potentially even dangerous.

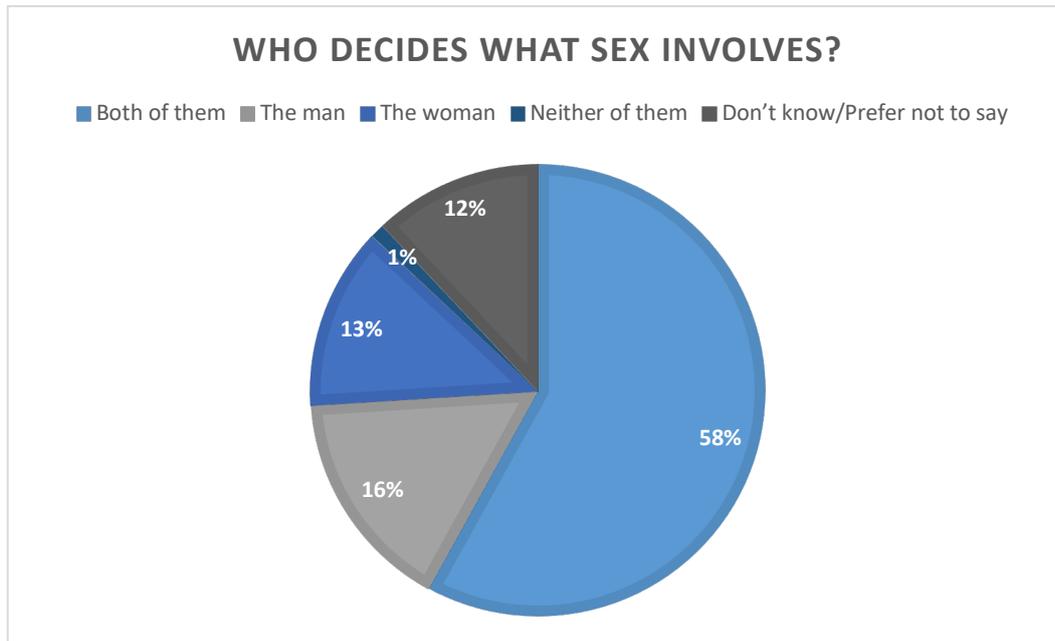
Who decides when sex finishes?



About the same number of people think that men decide when sex finishes (36%) as think that both partners decide (38%). Only 11% think that women decide when sex finishes. Women are more likely to think it is men who decide when sex finishes (41% compared to 31% of men).

18-24 year olds are much more likely to think it is the man who decides when sex finishes (50% compared to 31% of older respondents). This age group is less likely to consider it something decided by both partners. It is possible this is a reflection of different levels of experience but it also reflects messages in pornography where the male orgasm is the climax of the scene.

Who decides what sex involves?



The majority of people (58%) think it is both partners who decide what sex involves in heterosexual sex. 16% consider it is the man who decides, whereas 13% consider it is the woman who decides. Interestingly, women are more likely to think it is the man who decides (18% to 13%) and men more likely to think it is the woman who decides (18% to 9%).

However, the majority view that it is both is positive as it reflects a sense of mutuality (56% male and 61% female think it is both parties) - while women may not be starting sex they are at least having a say in what it involves. However, 22% of 18-24 year olds are more likely to think it is the man who decides (compared to 16% of those aged over 65). Again this could be a reflection of a lack of sexual experience, or/as well as an increased consumption of pornography across this generation where it is typically the man in control of the situation and asserting his needs within it.

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH TELL US AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The fact that around three quarters of people (73%) think that both partners are equally likely to enjoy themselves is positive, as it means that a large majority understand heterosexual sex as being potentially and actually enjoyable for both men and women.

However, there are some disheartening themes which arose and which have significant bearing on the way in which men and women are considered when people think about sex, and possibly on men's and women's actual experience of sex.

- ***Whilst most people think both genders want and need sex, a significant number think men need and want sex more; and most think men initiate sex in heterosexual couples***

EVAW concludes that the survey and focus groups show that people consider men to be more the 'actors', and the gender for whom sex is "for". If men and women believe that men inherently "need" sex more than women, then we think there is a basis for some men developing a greater sense of entitlement to sex, and some behaviours such as pushing, pestering and harassing women to have sex may be seen by some as justified or simply minimised and women's experience of this behaviour ignored. We need to ask what impact these stereotypes are having on heterosexual boys and men – what is the pressure they might feel to 'perform' their sexuality, and to engage in sexual activity in order to conform with society's expectations of them? How does this affect men who face sexual issues?

Women by comparison are seen as being overwhelmingly more passive – significantly less likely to initiate sex, to orgasm, while more likely to be interested in their male partner's pleasure. What are the impacts of these ideas on heterosexual girls and women? Do they feel encouraged to accept from a young age that sex is more "for" men than for them, and that their needs and desires are going to be secondary? Do they also learn at this point that they will be judged in a way men are not if they do not conform to these notions and do show a strong interest in sexual pleasure?

- ***The 'Orgasm Gap' and shared pleasure***

Our research showed the male orgasm as being seen as an intrinsic part of heterosexual sex. We hear of the term "orgasm gap" in relation to the lower rate of orgasm for women during heterosexual sex, when studies have shown that women are more likely to orgasm during lesbian sex. This is important as too often female climax is talked about in terms of being elusive or hard to reach. And yet the fact that this orgasm gap exists solely in heterosexual sex speaks to a lack of understanding, effort and mutuality. It is likely to be related to very basic ideas which set up the male orgasm, usually achieved through penile penetration, as the centrepiece of sex while women's orgasm is secondary.

Where there is a lesser expectation that women will experience pleasure or climax in sexual interactions, and when there are ideas that women are somehow less motivated in the first place as they are much more likely to "go along with sex" to keep their partner happy, then there is a low bar and women not enjoying sex as much is "normalized". These stereotypes are likely to be self-perpetuating. If women are led to believe that "going along" with sex is

a common female experience of sex then they may be less likely to articulate and explore their needs and wants in either early sexual relationships or when older. Similarly, they may also feel pressure not to express discomfort or pain.

Sidelining women's sexual pleasure can have a particular impact on women who are survivors of sexual violence (it is estimated that one in five women experience sexual assault or rape as adults). Survivors may experience intrusive traumatic thoughts, and fear in relation to sex, which they may want to process and manage during or afterwards. It will be more difficult to do this if the setting for consensual sex is male-centred and her physical and emotional experience is felt as secondary. The sense many women have before and during sex, of always being in the male gaze – not feeling as able to “be in their bodies” and relax but rather being judged and evaluated – can only accentuate this.

We need to ask ourselves why we permit this to continue? Who does it serve? Why do many men not feel ‘accountable’ for or expected to check in on their partner's pleasure, and how does the likely silencing of women in relation to feeling alright about asserting their desire for pleasure work? What are the consequences of not addressing these issues?

- ***Young People***

The research includes clear findings that the sexual norms of the age group 18 – 24 year olds are somewhat different than the rest of the population. Compared to other age groups they are most likely to believe: that men decide when sex finishes; that men are more likely to enjoy sex; and that both partners are less likely to be interested in their partner's pleasure; that women are more likely to be interested in their male partner's pleasure, and that men are most likely to orgasm during sex.

There is a huge amount of published research on the way pornography has become a ‘default sex educator’ and it is possible that these particularly outlying views of younger adults are linked to the influence of and high levels of exposure to pornography combined with less actual sexual experience. Mainstream pornography is overwhelmingly very male centred, created for the ‘male gaze’ and built on deeply sexist and usually misogynistic as well as racist stereotypes, such that it's probably not possible to imagine a less helpful sex educator. Society's complacency about permitting pornography to significantly influence younger people's perception of sexual norms is deeply concerning and needs attention, particularly given the impacts these stereotypes can have, as set out above.

- ***Why does this matter to sexual violence campaigners?***

The expectation that women should be an equal participant and enjoy heterosexual sex as much as men is of intrinsic importance and at the heart of decades if not centuries of the struggle for women's equality.

There is also however a profound connection to sexual violence. The ideas around men wanting and needing sex more, combined with the ideas that women are much more likely to refuse or to go along with sex (which men are hardly ever thought to do), add up to a toxic status for women as “gatekeepers” of sex. While men have a strong and simple urge

which is predictable and usually sex-seeking, women are held to be the determiners of whether consensual sex actually goes ahead. Placing this “gatekeeper” responsibility on women means women alone are expected to prevent or stop sexual intercourse, and if they fail to prevent sex they don’t want then it is their fault.

When rape occurs, these ideas and norms can drip feed into damaging responses – where women are blamed for sexual assault, and men are excused for their behaviour. This can play out in harmful and damaging attitudes such as asking why a woman “didn’t just say no” or what she did to “lead him on”. It provides some grounds for disbelief when rape and sexual violence occurs. It ‘naturalises’ or forgives men for pestering and pressuring women into sex, when women’s experience of this behaviour can be very harmful. If women are gatekeepers, but rape occurs – could it then lead to the idea ‘there must have been a part of her that wanted it’? This can tie into a widespread rape myth about women agreeing to sex and then regretting it after. In the focus groups, participants also spoke about the ‘sexual double standard’ where heterosexual women who are openly very interested in sex are regarded as great girlfriends but problematic and “cheap” when they are single. Such women are regarded as improperly not interested in “gatekeeping”, and as such almost cannot be raped.

If our interpretation of the data sounds like theory we need to remember that real, lived experience of these myths and stereotypes about women and men are at play right now in the criminal justice system’s huge failings on investigating and prosecuting rape. Our system permits anonymity for those who report rape because of the known shame, stigma and fear related to rape victim status, and there are some (not very effective) restrictions on defence teams making claims about a complainant’s sexual history in court because it is acknowledged that the perception of a woman who does not ‘gatekeep’ may effect her credibility. The ongoing attempt to devise rules which are fair to defendants and victims, regarding downloading material from mobile phones, is likely to be worrying to women considering reporting rape because they know that images/messages which are fundamentally about ‘gatekeeping’ will be discovered and potentially then miscommunicated as her failure to do so.

This disrespect of survivors by holding them to these ‘gatekeeper’ standards is finally reflected in our society’s broader failure to recognise the scale and harm of rape and ensure there is therapeutic support available when survivors seek it. We dehumanise and blame women when we make the “standard” for rape a question about whether she failed to “gatekeep”, and down the line these ideas track back to our ideas about sexual pleasure and who sex is even for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **A big social conversation** – we need to talk at length and at every level about female sexual pleasure, about who and what sex is for, about women’s and men’s desires and where they come from, in order to keep shifting the sexist stereotypes which are widely held and which ultimately limit women’s and men’s possibilities.
- **Explicit challenge of the idea of women being the gatekeepers of sex** - encouraging men to recognize their responsibility and accountability in ensuring willingness and pleasure of both partners during sex. Tackling the notion that sex is something ‘done’ to women, and instead developing a shared understanding about enthusiastic mutual consent and equality in sexual relationships, where women’s agency is recognised and celebrated.
- **We urge media makers, social influencers, people working in the arts to challenge sexist ideas about sex** – we need all those who are involved in kicking off and reproducing social conversations to take these issues on, tell stories about them, research them, enable conversations and give people who are not often heard platforms to speak about their experiences and their aspirations. With different stories we can get to a place where enthusiastic consent, mutuality and equality are the norm and there will be enormous benefits to this.
- **We urge professionals in relevant fields to engage with this information and make it relevant in their work** – these issues around sexist stereotypes, who sex is for, sexual pleasure and ultimately sexual harm are relevant, as a minimum, to educators, advertisers and media workers, health workers, criminal justice system workers, community leaders and many others. If people in these fields did the work to spell out the relevance of this research and what it means for gender equality in their particular field we could change social norms more quickly and better protect and respect survivors of abuse.
- **For Relationships and Sex Education in schools to include reference to sexual pleasure, female and male masturbation, and the clitoris** – rather than focusing solely on the functioning of the genitals that relate to menstruation and reproduction. ‘RSE’ becomes compulsory in all England secondary schools from September 2020. Young people want to have conversations with adults they trust about these matters as they are being bombarded with narratives from pornography in particular which reproduce deeply sexist norms.
- **There needs to be concerted challenge to the porn industry for its singular perpetuation of deeply sexist tropes about sex** – pornography’s construction by and for men and the male gaze, its routine deployment of narratives based on women as gatekeepers, women as ‘virgin-mother-whore’ gatekeepers, women and girls as objects for enacting male sexual pleasure on, have massively perpetuated sexist ideas about who sex is for, and have limited the very potential of sex for women.

OTHER KEY REFERENCES AND RESEARCH

YouGov survey for EAW of attitudes to rape and sexual violence published 6 December 2018

<https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/major-new-survey-many-still-unclear-what-rape-is/>

Vera-Gray & Fileborn (2018) '[Recognition and the Harms of "Cheer Up"](#)', *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 11(1): 78-96

Vera-Gray (2018) [The Right Amount of Panic: How women trade freedom for safety](#).
Bristol: Policy Press

British Medical Journal Sexual and Reproductive Health 'Prevalence and correlates of 'sexual competence' at first heterosexual intercourse among young people in Britain' Published January 2019

<https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/readiness-for-first-sex-is-about-more-than-age-for-many-young-britons/>

Office for Children's Commissioner report 'Basically porn is everywhere' June 2013

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/basically-porn-is-everywhere/>

Office for Children's Commissioner report 'Sex without consent I suppose that is rape' November 2013

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/sex-without-consent-i-suppose-that-is-rape/>