

Libido-free zone: the mystery of women's disappearing sex drive

Female desire has waned since the heady days of the sexual revolution

BETTINA ARNDT



Amid the salacious reporting following the Ashley Madison hack this month, there was one particularly startling revelation. Contrary to the site's claims about plenty of female as well as male users, it turned out there were about 28 million men and five million women in the account list. Only 14 per cent of the users of the site were women.

"The Ashley Madison hack proves men are dogs. But the Ashley Madison service itself proves men are suckers," Naomi Schaefer Riley gloated in *The New York Post*.

Perhaps it proves something very different. For all the male blaming that has been going on over the hacking scandal, the malicious delight at male cheaters and scumbags getting their come-uppance, there has been remarkably little attention paid to what drives these huge numbers of men to seek sexual relief outside their marriages.

The missing part of the puzzle is strong evidence many men are facing an increasing problem in achieving sexually fulfilling marriages or long-term relationships. With swelling numbers of sexually disinterested women determining the sexual frequency in their relationships, men face a male sex deficit that shows every sign of growing stronger.

Surveys from across the world are now reporting dropping sexual frequencies, more celibate marriages and an increasing gap between male and female sexual desire with even young women reporting loss of sexual interest.

In Britain this month, sociologist Catherine Hakim produced a report, *Supply and Desire: Sexuality and the Sex Industry in the 21st Century*, which argued for decriminalisation of prostitution.

In the paper, published by the Institute of Economic Affairs, Hakim summed up a series of international sex surveys that showed male sexual desire was manifested at least twice as often as female desire.

"The gap is growing over time so the sexual deficit among men is growing steadily," she wrote, spelling out the many reasons this situation was likely to get worse for men. "Male demand for sexual entertainments of all kinds is thus growing and ineradicable."

Hakim's most recent book, *The New Rules*, examined internet sex sites and found a sexless or low-sex marriage to be the most common cause for people choosing to use such sites.

This month another sex news story made a splash — approval by the US Food and Drug Administration of Flibanserin, the low-libido drug for women.

It's not particularly effective — only 8 per cent to 13 per cent of users have increased libido — and it already has been rejected twice because of possible side effects such as fainting and dizziness, but many are applauding this first cab off the rank in the pharmaceutical race to find some means of helping women with low desire.

Yet the drug has attracted critics who argue the manufacturers are exploiting a "natural mismatch" between female and male expectations of sex by creating a creepy "on" switch for female lust. The answer, according to these critics, is for men to curb their unreasonable, unseemly desires.

While arguments rage over solutions to the male sex deficit, the more important question is why it is growing? It's more than 50 years since the arrival of the contraceptive pill was celebrated by the women's movement as launching the liberation of female sexuality.

Women's sexuality began to blossom: less guilt, more desire, more pleasure, more orgasms. The gap between men and women decreased with more women openly enjoying their sexuality. So why has this progress now derailed? Why the sudden drop in female desire and response?

These questions are shaping the work of one of the leading lights in the current world of sexology. As head of the Society for the

Scientific Study of Sexuality, Finnish sociologist Osmo Kontula is preparing his presidential address to be delivered at the society's November conference.

He's pondering the results of sex surveys he has been conducting since 1971, which have recently revealed some startling results:

- A big drop in female orgasms. More women, particularly young women, having trouble climaxing.
- More arousal and lubrication problems, especially in younger and much older women.
- An increasing desire gap between men and women, with more women going off sex.
- Even young women experiencing loss of desire, with one in four losing interest even less than two years into a relationship.
- A big drop in sexual frequency, with more and more couples celibate.

"There are some real mysteries here," says Kontula, speaking from his office at the Population Research Institute in Helsinki.

"Why was there such a decline in intercourse frequency in the 2000s? There's been a 10 to 15 per cent drop in people of all ages who say they've had sex in the last week. People are now having less sex than in the early 1970s and the greatest decline has been for young people, those aged 25 to 40."

Kontula's 2009 book *Between Sexual Desire and Reality: The Evolution of Sex in Finland* was based on surveys conducted regularly between 1971 and 2007. He is analysing the results of a new survey from this year and finds there has been a further small drop in sexual frequency in the past eight years and the gap between male and female desire continues to widen.

Couples also are reporting increasing difficulty discussing sex in their relationships, which is hardly surprising when mismatched desire is so often the source of marital tension.

"I thought of it as the gulf war," wrote a male participant in research I conducted some years ago on how couples coped with mismatched desire.

"She felt pressures and I felt frustrated. Mostly she went along with sex, albeit unenthusiastically. I remember one time she said, 'forget the foreplay, let's get the thing over with.' Now that's how to make a bloke feel wanted. I didn't know whether to laugh or leave."

Kontula doesn't know why the gulf war is increasing. "The desires of men and women seem at times to be on different planets," he says, noting that women were able to fulfil their lower desires for sexual intercourse more successfully than men and many ended up having the frequency of sex they wanted.

"It seems women are more frequently gatekeepers, deciding on when and how often the couple had sex," he says.

Interestingly, in living-apart relationships women were least likely to show loss of desire — regular absences seem to make lust easier to maintain. But the huge leap in lost libido in cohabiting women remains a mystery, although it may link to happiness research I wrote about in *Inquirer* last month showing a big drop in happiness in women who remain for long periods in defacto relationships without marrying.

The dropping sexual frequency reflects a recent shift in the balance of sexual power in relationships, suggest the authors of the latest version of our major sex survey — the Australian Study of Health and Relationships.

"These changes in attitudes and behaviour may reflect a shift away from a model of sexuality in which women's sexual behaviour is shaped by men's needs towards a feminist model of female sexuality in which women have the right to refuse or initiate sex," concluded University of Sussex psychologist Richard de Visser and his Australian colleagues who co-authored ASHR2, published last year.

Their latest research found a small but significant decline during the past decade in the average weekly frequency of sex — from 1.9 to 1.5 times a week among men and from 1.8 to 1.5 times a week among women. Most men (85 per cent) and women (69 per cent) wanted to have sex more often than they actually did.



Even young women are experiencing a loss of desire, with one in four losing interest less than two years into a relationship

'The desires of men and women seem at times to be on different planets'

OSMO KONTULA
FINNISH SOCIOLOGIST

Kontula's data shows many women who indicate they would prefer a higher frequency of sex also experience a fairly frequent lack of sexual desire. (We don't have the most recent survey data covering sexual desire available in Australia as yet, although back in 2005 a majority of women in all age groups over 20 reported lack of sexual interest.)

Kontula speculates women's preference for a higher frequency relates to a desire to please their partners.

Yet leading Melbourne sex therapist Lynda Carlyle believes it also may be about women wanting to want sex.

"Although there are many women who aren't bothered by their lack of desire, there are women who are miserable about their lost libido. They want to feel sexy again and know their disinterest is causing enormous strain in relationships, which is what's driving the demand for drugs like Flibanserin. There are women who would love to pop a little pink pill to make them feel like sex again," Carlyle says.

So why is this problem of mismatched desire getting worse? It's not just Finland where this is showing up. Hakim reports international surveys also reveal a de-

cline in sexual frequency in Britain, the US, Germany and Japan.

A review of research on female desire by psychologist Marta Meana from the University of Nevada found discrepancies in desire within relationships were now the norm rather than the exception but that very few women were distressed by their lack of desire per se rather than worrying about the impact on relationships.

What we are seeing is many more women who don't want sex and can't be bothered trying to get aroused — it's just all become too hard.

One of Australia's experts on desire, sex therapist Sandra Pertot believes it's partly a reaction to the new demand for women to climax during sexual activity — it's not good enough for them to just enjoy giving pleasure to their partners. "Women say no to sex if they are uncertain whether they will climax or worry it will take forever. The women know they take longer to come if they are tired, stressed or anxious and direct sexual touch can sometimes be annoying when they aren't in the mood. The man, with the best of intentions, often puts pressure on her to keep trying."

The author of *When Your Sex Drives Don't Match* and other books on desire, Pertot talks openly about her own experience with loss of libido when her second child was a bad sleeper. She was happy to have sex knowing it was OK if she didn't climax or even if she fell asleep, which she did on various occasions.

"It was still great sex in the circumstances, which suited us both. It was about feeling loved and accepted," Pertot says.

These days suggesting women are sometimes happy to have one for the team attracts howls of derision. Yet there's ample evidence from the work done by Canadian psychiatry professor Rosemary Basson that women with no spontaneous desire will often seek sex to achieve intimacy in their relationships and that sometimes, in the process, desire kicks in and they become aroused and reach orgasm. This "just do it" approach is not just about pleasing men but enabling women to achieve sexual pleasure despite their loss of libido.

When I wrote about Basson's work in my book *The Sex Diaries*, most female commentators weren't having a bar of it. The notion that women could gain any



benefits from having sex without prior desire was dismissed as outrageous white-picket-fence thinking. The prevailing culture embraces the idea women are entitled to just shut up shop if they aren't interested in sex. And the growing male sex deficit? Well, that's their problem.

It's not just libido that is waning, but also women's capacity to reach orgasm, according to Kontula's research. That's the other puzzle: "There's been a large drop since 1999 — over 10 percentage points — in the proportion of young women reporting they always have an orgasm during sexual activity. And we find this is linked to women's perception of sexual enjoyment. One in two women who usually reach orgasm during lovemaking continue to view sex as enjoyable, but only 15 per cent of women who rarely had orgasm saw sex as highly enjoyable," Kontula reports.

The latest ASHR2 survey also shows an orgasm drop for women — the percentage of Australian women climaxing at their last sexual encounter dropped from 69 per cent to 66 per cent, a far smaller change.

Carlyle, who has been working as a sex therapist for more than eight years, says she's seeing increasing numbers of younger women struggling with orgasms. She reels off a string of reasons this could be happening. Busyness, for a start. Women's crazy, pressured working lives are coupled with the excessive zeal shown by helicopter parents always hovering over their children. Unlike some lucky men who can use sex as stress relief, most tired, cranky women find nothing lights their fire.

Then there's the distraction issue. Carlyle speculates that our younger generations of women, having grown up multi-tasking and flitting from one form of social media to another, may have far more difficulty concentrating on the task at hand. "Arousal and orgasm are all about learning to switch off and tune into sensations," she says. Distraction is the enemy of female arousal.

There's a great video clip from Upriseworldwise.com featuring a smiling woman in bed. All that's visible is her face and the occasional movement beneath the sheets. She starts off blissfully happy ... "Hmm, that feels good ... Wait, wait, oh yes, that's so good."

But then thoughts start to intrude: "Shit, he's getting bored." And then, "Oh no, don't go down there. I didn't get waxed this week." So it goes on, all her worries start crowding in — about her weight, how she's got to work out more, all sorts of crazy thoughts. Her ramblings are interrupted by a stern message from her cranky vagina — "Will you shut the hell up and let me enjoy myself?"

Then there's our obesity epidemic. Just as overweight men have problems with erections — blood has too far to travel to get through to the areas where it is needed — so, too, overweight women may have issues with arousal. Even if there's no physical impediment, body image can stop women relaxing enough to enjoy a lover's attention. The earth is unlikely to move if you're busy keeping clutch sheets hiding an unsightly body. The crazy thing is that so many women with nothing to hide are still crippled with self-consciousness during lovemaking. "Many women lack confidence if they put on a kilo or two," Carlyle says.

What else? Well, there's porn, which many, such as Carlyle, believe to be encouraging men to offer only "genitally focused, hard and fast stimulation", which doesn't give women the opportunity to build up arousal. It leads women into feeling they should come quickly and worrying when they don't.

There is an upside to all that hot and heavy male viewing — University of Sydney researcher Kath

Albury found the promotion of cunnilingus on the internet meant many young men now see this activity as highly desirable.

But a stumbling block is female discomfort with their bodies — the latest ASHR2 survey shows most young women don't masturbate. Only 30 per cent of 16 to 19-year-olds do so, up about 7 per cent from a decade ago. There's much else suggesting many young women are simply not comfortable with their nether regions — including the new demand for cosmetic surgery. When it comes to oral sex the yuck factor means girls are far likelier to give than receive.

ASHR2 found only 24 per cent of women in all age groups said they'd received oral sex last time there had been sexual activity — shagging remains the steady diet featuring in most couples' sex life. The researchers noted their previous survey revealed women were likelier to climax if there was a variety of delights on offer — intercourse, plus manual and oral — rather than simply this white bread solution.

That's no doubt true, but in these rushed and busy times, it certainly makes matters simpler if bonking does the trick. One very interesting issue is whether women might be losing the art of responding to this most basic form of lovemaking. During the past few decades there has been much debate over the proportion of women reaching vaginal orgasm rather than requiring direct clitoral stimulation. We often still hear American sex researcher Shere Hite's claim — made in 1976 — that only a third of women respond without that direct clitoral contact. Yet there's plenty of more recent research suggesting the numbers are far higher, including European studies showing a majority of older women respond vaginally most of the time.

It's a confusing picture, with research highlighting the extensive hidden anatomy of the clitoris, which suggests clitoral stimulation may always be part of the story, but also work by US professors Beverly Whipple and Barry Komisaruk showing a distinct, separate nerve pathway for vaginally induced orgasm.

Catherine Blackledge, the author of an excellent book on the vagina, *The Story of V*, argues many women today never learn to tune in to the more subtle delight a vagina may offer because they are growing up in a culture that promotes the clitoris as the gold standard of female pleasure. She also believes porn movies don't help matters — "all that quick thrusting. To experience vaginal orgasm you need to slow down so you can think and feel deep into these vaginal sensations."

These days many young women also spend years in casual relationships where they may learn very little about their own responses.

The decade of dating that proceeds first marriage for most women today will often include hook-ups and other short-term relationships where women never have the trust and confidence reality to express their needs.

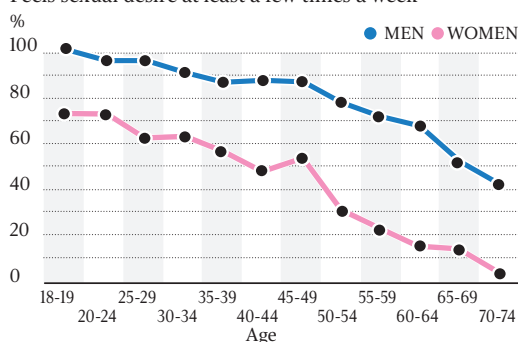
Back in the 1970s, all the talk was about new research showing the incredible capacity of women for sexual enjoyment and multiple orgasms. A psychoanalyst called Mary Jane Sherfey published a provocative article predicting men would struggle to deal with women's sexual appetites. "The sexual hunger of the female and her capacity for copulation completely exceeds that of any male," she wrote.

Who would have predicted that 50 years later the story behind the sex scandals dominating our news would be the male sex deficit, with sex-hungry men risking so much to cope with their mounting frustrations?

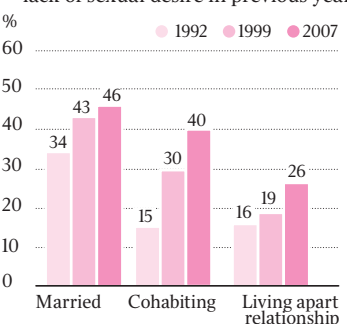
Former sex therapist Bettina Arndt is an online dating coach.

DESIRE AND REALITY

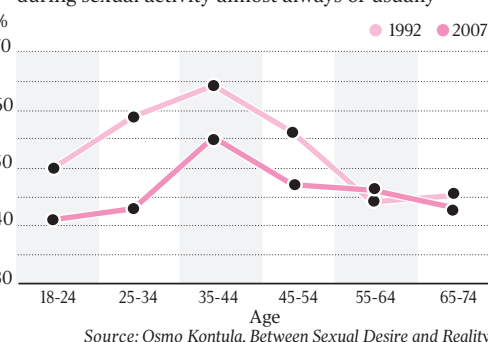
Feels sexual desire at least a few times a week



Proportion of women with frequent lack of sexual desire in previous year



Proportion of women who experience orgasm during sexual activity almost always or usually



Source: Osmo Kontula, *Between Sexual Desire and Reality*