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To stop HIV, let's bring sexy back

Sexual liberation is not only about more sex for some people, or more orgasms, but should prioritize pleasure, consent, and respect for a range of sexualities, (dis)abilities and body types. Part of Transformation's liberation series.

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By opening up aspirations for safe pleasure we can create a wider array of political freedoms. Credit: The Pleasure Project.

We often forget that safer sex can feel good. Putting on a condom could be like squeezing into your favorite sexy boots or latex dress, ready for action. Telling

your lover what you want could be foreplay. Sex education could include creative masturbation techniques. After all, what's safer than a good wank?

Today models of sexual liberation emphasize narrow goals of individual pleasure, focusing on lithe, heterosexual, monogamous bodies galloping towards orgasm. The politics of broader sexual liberation are rarely discussed.

Even gay liberation movements have largely stopped challenging the broader connections between homophobia and other types of oppression.

While it's important to discuss distorting images of sex, consent, and abuse, society's focus only on saying 'no' leaves little room to highlight how we can learn to say yes to good, safe sex. Sex that fulfils us, makes us happy, satisfies us and bonds us to others. Recognising that we can create new types of safe, pleasurable sex, in which multi-faceted desires are recognized, should give us confidence that other forms of liberation are possible.

Pleasure is arguably, if not definitively, the single most powerful motivating factor for sexual behaviour. – World Association for Sexual Health, 2008

Sexual pleasure remains a highly significant, if not primary, motivating factor for sexual behaviour. There is strong evidence that the pursuit of pleasure is one of the primary reasons people have sex, and that fear of disease is not a strong motivator for safer sex.

Despite this, safer sex campaigns have focused almost exclusively on fear-based messages to promote safer sex, to the extent that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is seen either as destructive or even as a major contributor to the spread of HIV.

Discussion of sexual pleasure in HIV prevention campaigns or sexual health programmes is usually limited to how pleasure can lead to less condom use or safer sex: this Zimbabwe Government poster, or the British 'Don't die of ignorance campaign' are key examples.

These public health campaigns reinforce the sex negative stereotypes that men are predators, women are victims who are incapable of enjoying sexual pleasure,

and that people who contract HIV through sex are guilty. They fail to recognize queer sexualities other than those of gay or bisexual men, who are seen as universally high risk.

These stereotypes are symptomatic of a sex negative culture. The same ideals uphold social control of pleasure and sexuality, which in turn contributes to maintaining patriarchy, heterosexual privilege and traditional family structures.

Sexual health campaigns reflect a culture of lacking aspirations for societal or development goals that emphasise pleasure, well-being, or the happiness of populations instead of simply economic growth or increases in GDP. Countries or development projects that use well-being measures to influence national policy are limited, and health projects that aim and measure women's pleasure non-existent.

In ignoring pleasure, the sexual health community is ignoring one of its most potent tools in stopping the spread of disease. It is also stopping the broader discussion of sexuality rights, including the recognition of individual agency, especially when it comes to those most affected by HIV. In development dialogue, for example, African women are portrayed largely as victims of male desire with little choice of their own.

2014 marks 20 years since the ground breaking International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. A recent review of progress by the UN General Assembly highlights progress in all areas of reproductive health and rights, and yet it is dominated by data on contraception, HIV and childbirth. I could find only a couple of references to 'human sexuality' and 'comprehensive sexuality education'.

There were no mentions of satisfaction, pleasure or desire.

Pleasure can also be about power, and men and women are expected to behave in certain ways to fit in with societal expectations. In many cultures wanting sex makes you 'too easy' or 'a slag', if you are a woman. In one Nigerian study women reported that if they got too excited during sex their husbands asked why they were acting like prostitutes (and not in a respectful way).

In many cultures being too lubricated is a sign of being promiscuous, resulting in a preference for dry sex, whereas for men experience is respected. Women are also burdened with needing to appear always passive or ignorant. We risk violence, death or ostracism if we 'enjoy sex too much' or are not virgins when we are meant to be.

On top of this, sexual activity is often hierarchically ranked: with heterosexual married sex reified as the least worst form, solitary sex lower down and sex workers, genderqueer and trans* people and 'promiscuous single' women at the bottom of the pile.

As theorist Gayle Rubin points out: "*Sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance...Small difference in value or behavior are seen as cosmic threats.*"

So how do we transform ourselves, creating more meaningful, good, safer sex lives? Sexual liberation is not only about more sex for some people, or more orgasms, but should prioritize pleasure, consent, and respect for a wide range of sexualities, (dis)abilities and body types.

Explicit safer sex campaigns that eroticize good, safe sex have been shown to make people feel good and be safer with their lovers. Studies comparing American and Dutch young people showed that the Dutch sex education, which focused on mutually enjoyable, responsible sex, leads to lower rates of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

We at The Pleasure Project work to try and ensure that there are examples of erotic materials that are safe and that sexual health and training materials include discussions of pleasure. To this end, we wrote The Global Mapping of Pleasure to collect together examples of community groups, sex bloggers, porn film makers who are doing just that.

We profiled the Sensuousness Action Research Project in West Bengal in India: they train gay male masseurs and clients in safe, sensual, satisfying pleasure techniques, aiming to provide economic security and life stability for the sex workers. Another project, St James Infirmary, in San Francisco, is a sex worker

health service where workers are asked about what they enjoy at work in order to expand discussions of good safe sex.

We also profiled erotic safer-sex tea towels for gay men in Australia, dildo-making contests for marriage counselling nuns in Mozambique, and 'seduction' training modules for couples in Nigeria. Many groups work to enhance the sexual repertoire of heterosexual monogamous relationships, encouraging a less traditional view of the kind of sex you have with your marriage or long term partner. One slogan read: 'Many positions with one, not one position with many'.

All our case studies avoid sex negativity, promoting safer sex with a focus on desire and pleasure, at the same time working to reduce the shame people feel in pleasure. Most of the community groups in the mapping recognise that a focus on pleasure and safety means liberation from traditional perceptions of their sexuality and lives.

Dorothy Aken'Ova, founder of the Nigerian International Centre for Reproductive Health and Sexual Rights says:

People thought we were wasting time talking about sex and pleasure, when maternal mortality is so high ... But I was convinced that if this delicate, taboo thing – sexual pleasure – could be negotiated by women, then almost anything can be negotiated (...and that idea gave me multiple orgasms!)

Safer sex is promoted best through positive incentives and building communities of practise, learning from people who constantly negotiate safer sex, like sex workers, with people who are seen as the experts, like sex educators.

By opening up aspirations for safe pleasure in a wider range of relationships, or for people not traditionally expected to experience pleasure – women and people with disabilities, for example – we can unearth a much wider range of political freedoms.

Getting in touch with what we want from our sex lives might unearth much broader visions of liberation, the kind that moves beyond the individual to recognise collective visions of change.

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