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INTRODUCTION



Advancing Sexual Pleasure as a Fundamental Human Right and Essential for Sexual Health, Overall Health and Well-Being: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Sexual Pleasure

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ABSTRACT

On September 11, 2021, the World Association for Sexual Health ratified a Declaration on Sexual Pleasure in its General Assembly. This declaration was a bold attempt by WAS to urge all spheres of influence in society to recognize the critical importance of sexual pleasure as a key component of sexual health and sexual rights. This special issue of the International Journal of Sexual Health (the official journal of the WAS) contains a technical document which supports the Declaration. In addition, it contains background papers that were commissioned to inform the evidence supporting the technical document and to outline the strategies for implementing the WAS Declaration on Sexual Pleasure in promoting sexual health and rights.

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Introduction

Gradually, sexual rights have become less stigmatized and have been recognized as closely aligned with fundamental human rights. Yet, there is still a gap recognizing sexual pleasure as a fundamental human right and essential to the promotion of sexual health and overall health and wellbeing. With continued threats to sexual health and rights, there is a serious need to address the importance of pleasure as a key component of sexual health and rights (Ford et al., 2019; Gruskin et al., 2019; Logie et al., 2021; Starrs et al., 2018). Doing so moves away from conservative approaches that define sex and sexuality solely in reproductive terms. It pushes forward efforts to include the fundamental aspect of “pleasure” as part of sexual health—where the use of the term is sometimes used a battleground for defining sexual health (Edwards & Coleman, 2004). In addition, with the increased recognition of sexual abuse and harassment, the pleasurable aspects of consensual


sexual activity should not get lost in necessary prevention efforts.

As a result, the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), has issued a Declaration on Sexual Pleasure (WAS, 2021). The Declaration represents the culmination of over 40 years of the history of WAS. WAS [formerly the World Association for Sexology (WAS)] was founded in 1978 by a multidisciplinary, worldwide group of non-governmental organizations. WAS promotes and advocates for sexual health and sexual rights throughout the lifespan and across the world by advancing the field of sexology, sexuality research, comprehensive sexuality education, and clinical care and services, all informed by evidence and scientific enquiry.

The WAS Declaration on Sexual Pleasure builds upon the Declaration of Sexual Health for the Millennium, which recognized the importance of aligning the goals of our field with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to combat poverty, hunger, sickness, illiteracy,

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environmental degradation, and discrimination against women (See [Supplementary Appendix I](#) for a description of the process of developing the Declaration on Sexual Pleasure).

The Declaration on Sexual Pleasure also builds upon its Declaration of Sexual Rights (WAS, 1999, 2015), which acknowledged sexual pleasure as a fundamental human right (see [Supplementary Appendix II](#)). This Declaration (2015) took into consideration the intrinsic links with the WAS Sexual Health for the Millennium Declaration (2008), the WHO working definitions on sexuality, sexual health, and sexual rights (2006), the IPPF Sexual Rights Declaration (2008), and other documents related to sexual rights. In particular, it drew on the ever-increasing ways in which formally recognized human rights standards are being applied to sexual health by authoritative human rights bodies at the international, regional, and national levels. It was elaborated by a multidisciplinary expert group, in consultation with specialists from various organizations working in sexual rights.

To promote sexual rights as human rights, WAS has collaborated with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in developing regional guidelines for the promotion of sexual health (WHO, 2002), as well as with the World Health Organization in crafting and disseminating the working definitions of sex, sexuality, sexual health, and sexual rights (WHO, 2006), and developing a conceptual framework for promoting sexual health and rights (WHO, 2010, 2015). In addition, these collaborative relationships have opened doors to important associations with other UN agencies, such as United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), as well as other international organizations, such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2008), International Society of Sexual Medicine (ISSM), World Psychiatric Association, and the World Professional Association of Transgender Health. Collaborating with these organizations has had a significant impact on recognizing sexual rights as fundamental human

rights. Addressing sexual pleasure is an essential next step for work promoting sexual rights and sexual health.

Introduction to the special issue

This special issue brings together a unique series of papers that delve into issues central to sexual pleasure.

In their article on the health benefits of sexual expression, Gianotten et al. (2021) build the evidence base for sexual pleasure by documenting its link to health. The paper examines pleasure in the context of solo and partnered activity and explores the health benefits of non-penetrative sexual acts, such as manual stimulation and oral sex, which are quite common, particularly among gender-diverse and sexually-diverse populations. Gianotten et al. concludes that sexual expression “*favor[s] physical and mental health. We guess that many more health benefits will be found when sexuality and intimacy are less taken for granted when studying people.*” The article ends with recommendations for how to better address sexual pleasure in education, training, clinical settings, and public health and policy more broadly.

In another essential review paper, Reis et al. (2021) examine psychosocial and behavioral factors related to women’s sexual pleasure. The authors explore conceptualizations of sexual pleasure, arguing for a multi-level approach to pleasure with a focus on bio-psycho-social factors. Despite the documented “pleasure gap” where women frequently report experiencing less sexual pleasure and more violations of their sexual rights, the study pulls together research showing positive effects and possibility for women’s sexual pleasure. Findings show how communication, autonomy, self-esteem, assertiveness, and gender equality all benefit women’s sexual pleasure.

Laan et al. (2021) echo the importance of gender equality in their paper exploring how, in many cultures, sex is less pleasurable and associated with greater consequences for women, even though women do not differ in the capacity for sexual pleasure. Because this pleasure gap is not a biological given, the authors call for a more critical discourse of sexual pleasure. By creating

awareness of current inequalities, it can help lift restrictions on women's opportunities for pleasure and reduce gender differences. These changes would support global sexual justice.

Fava and Fortenberry (2021) also center the importance of sexual justice for sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is diverse—and broad literature identifies adverse impacts of discrimination and trauma, such as sexual assault and poverty. Fava and Fortenberry point out that roughly 70% the population has experienced a form of lifetime trauma—including physical violence, sexual violence, war, and/or accidents. With this in mind, Fava and Fortenberry present an approach to address sexual pleasure as part of sexual wellbeing and sexual health, linked to sexual justice in a framework of trauma-informed sex positivity.

In an important piece on technology, the internet, and sexual pleasure, Borrás Pérez (2021) laments the misinformation and roadblocks to finding sexual pleasure, health, and rights resources on the internet. Despite the illusion of having “the world at your fingertips,” sexual health content is often flagged as inappropriate by Big Tech companies and automatically banned. For instance, Google once banned a sexual health organization from using its Google Checkout service to sell contraceptive education kits online. Borrás Pérez's calls for urgent action to hold Big Tech accountable for its impact on public health and to make sexual pleasure, health, and rights content easier to access online providing resources where people can seek out help, anonymously and/or privately, if desired.

The importance of including pleasure in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is highlighted by Mark et al. (2021), who argue that *not* including pleasure is detrimental to sexual development, impedes inclusive education, and impacts sexual well-being. Although many CSE educators would like to move beyond prevention toward integrating pleasure, they are often limited by funding, too little time, inadequate training, and lack of support to go beyond risk-reduction for fear of backlash. They encourage partners to use The WAS Declaration on Sexual Pleasure to advocate for pleasure in CSE. Doing this has the potential to improve risk-reduction,

healthy relationships, celebration of sexual diversity, exercise of sexual rights, empowerment, and consent, and prevention of gender-based sexual violence.

Sladden et al. (2021) highlight the need for a life-course approach to sexual pleasure. The authors make a compelling argument for a focus on sexual pleasure at each life stage. At birth, during infancy, and in childhood, it is necessary to protect future sexual health, rights, and pleasure by ensuring bodily integrity and autonomy. This enables later, the capacity to experience sexual pleasure, realize sexual rights, and sustain sexual health. Through the life course into adolescence and young adult years, support and guidance are needed to help individuals learn to take responsibility for sexual health and rights—to ensure all sex is consensual, pleasurable for all partners and without force, and to avoid unintended pregnancy and STIs. Finally, in later life, a range of sexual health issues require more attention, including menopause, sexual function, cancer treatment/prevention, and enabling people to pursue a pleasurable sex life.

Ford et al. (2021) move to healthcare settings as an essential place where sexual pleasure could help improve service provision and healthcare utilization. The authors explore how to incorporate a value for pleasure into healthcare services, grounded in the assumption that pleasure is a central reason why people have sex and that recognizing this can support people in creating safer, more pleasurable sexual experiences. The article is focused on practical application and includes links to best practices for sexual pleasure in four thematic areas: Sexual Health Education, Service Delivery, Research and Interventions, and Health Promotion. Ford et al. also call for more research systematically examining the best ways to incorporate pleasure for different outcomes and populations in healthcare settings.

Philpott et al. (2021) bring our attention to how exactly to best study outcomes related to sexual pleasure. Despite decades of global commitments, investment, research, and advocacy, the current normative model of sexual health remains focused on ill-health, fear, and deficit-based approaches to health, rather than a more holistic model of well-being. The authors describe

the importance of sexual pleasure in SRHR programming, while highlighting its absence, historically. They provide an overview of an upcoming systematic review and meta-analysis exploring the extent to which pleasure-inclusive sexual health programs and sexuality education improve outcomes and examine the key practical, methodological, and theoretical challenges in carrying out such a review.

Finally, Komisaruk and Rodriguez del Cerro (2021) narrows in on the human brain asking how it generates sexual pleasure. They develop an innovative thesis that positions sexual pleasure as a fundamental life force—one that drive biological adaptive behavior—with relevance to sexual health, wellbeing, and rights. They provide evidence that pleasurable stimulation is beneficial to health, mapping out sexual pleasure as a cognitive experience, in hopes of better understanding its importance to the body and to health as well as inspiring future research.

Conclusion

We hope that this Declaration on Sexual Pleasure and these supporting articles contained in this Special Issue of the *International Journal of Sexual Health* will help further center sexual pleasure in advancing sexual health and rights.

Conflict of interest statement

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