THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Progressive Sex:
A critical analysis of sexual agency and satisfaction across the life course of progressive Chicagoan women

By

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August 2025

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

This study analyzes how progressive cisgender women in Chicago, aged 51-77, have experienced and understood sexual agency and pleasure across the life course. Drawing on 12 qualitative interviews, I investigate how women with enduring commitments to gender equality and social justice negotiate heteronormative sexual scripts that prioritize male pleasure and constrain female agency. Framing the analysis through a multiscalar feminist sociological lens, the paper examines how structural transformations–such as increased access to reproductive technology, sexual liberation movements, and shifting norms around consent–interact with processes of gender socialization and interpersonal sexual dynamics. Participants' testimonies reveal that although they were socialized into traditional gender roles, they increasingly resisted those norms over time, especially as aging opened space to reflect, reframe, and revise earlier experiences. The findings show that progressive ideology both supported and was reinforced by greater sexual agency in later life, offering insight into how political consciousness, personal circumstances, and sociocultural context intersect in shaping intimate behavior. This study contributes to sociological research on gender, sexuality, and political identity by showing how women not only internalize but actively contest dominant sexual scripts as part of broader processes of ideological and sexual self-formation.

Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes.

–Kate Millett, from *Sexual Politics*

Women were great to hang on to, but that's only because they could cook a meal and then provide sex after that. I think that because of that framework, we continued to, as young women …well, we kind of followed each other's footsteps, but we also…we also succumbed. We succumbed to traditional stuff in a way that I wouldn't put up with anymore, but I was a young woman, so what was I gonna do? We were still held in bondage to tradition. Even though we were on the cusp of something new, our individual relationships with men had not changed, and may still not have changed because of this male-female dynamic.

–Patty (71), Informant

Introduction

On our last day of college, some girlfriends and I hit our local dive bar to celebrate. A woman sitting next to us asked if we were graduating. She was an alumna in town for her twenty-year reunion, waiting for *her* girlfriend to reminisce about *their* college years. Paulina and her friend Andrea, when she arrived, spent the next few hours buying us drinks and exchanging stories about university. Eventually, one of us asked, "What was sex like back then?" And after that, "how about sexual assault?" Their answers spawned the questions I work to answer in this paper: *It was different back then. If you were too drunk and had sex with a guy, we just called it bad sex. No one called it sexual assault like the same actions could be called today. You would go to sleep and move on*. Many women I went on to speak with recall sexual experiences which today could be labeled rape or sexual assault, interpolated through a contemporary, and perhaps progressive, understanding of consent and acceptable sexual conduct. Paulina and Andrea attended the same university I did; we likely read the same texts in our core classes. But what we may call rape today, they shrugged off as a bad night. *How* did this change in perspective change throughout their lives, and what other things are reinterpreted through contemporary lenses?

Over the past few decades, social scientists have identified an emerging gender gap in ideology: a significant segment of women retain liberal positions into old age, opposing the traditional trend among both men and women wherein political conservatism increased with age. This emergent segment is largely composed of well-educated, professional women who have resisted conservatism in part due to their support for reproductive rights and gender equality (Norrander & Wilcox 2008). This shift poses interesting questions in light of theoretical analyses of gender and qualitative sex research consistently finding that traditional sexual scripts prioritize male pleasure and agency over the experiences of women, with the traditionally feminine qualities of passivity and submissiveness disadvantaging women and even enabling coercion (Warshaw 2019; Sanchez, Kiefer & Ybarra 2006; MacKinnon 1982; Rubin 1997). Researchers have even argued that there is a "stalled gender revolution" in heterosexual intimate encounters due to the gendered pleasure deficit between heterosexual men and women, wherein men who have sex with women experience more satisfaction and orgasms than women who have sex with men (Frederick et al. 2018, Fahs & Swank 2016). Women with progressive beliefs often inherently reject the traditional gender ideology that undergirds gendered sexual behavior. *Is this reflected in their sexual conduct?* And if so, *are they having more satisfying sex?*

Over the past seventy years, movements for civil rights, women's liberation, and sexual freedom have transformed the sexual landscape in the United States (Therborn 2006, Kao 2000, Hunt 1996). A segment of older adult women aged 50-75 were born around the cusp and crest of massive demographic change, technological innovation, increasing availability of information through media, and changing social norms regarding gender, race, and sexuality (Agree 2017; Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman 2011; Hare-Mustin 1988).These changes and innovations significantly increased women's legal protections and ability to support themselves outside the

patriarchal family structure, in turn providing more opportunities to feasibly partake in sex outside heterosexual marriage. While older adult women have witnessed the liberalization of gender and sexual norms in parts of the United States and across mass culture, sexual behavior among heterosexuals continues to reproduce gender inequality in pleasure trajectories (Frederick et al. 2018). However, recent sex research finds that *aging* also helps women undo gendered sexual scripts, which consequently positively affects their pleasure trajectory (Bastian, Carpenter & Miller 2025). Thus progressive older adult women–who oppose patriarchal gender norms–can shed light on the process of undoing gendered sexual scripts with an especially critical lens.

This study offers a multiscalar feminist sociological analysis of a cohort of women aged 51-77 with self-identified progressive, left-leaning political beliefs, in order to evaluate how they experienced sexual agency and pleasure throughout their lives; with a particular interest in how considerations of gender have affected sexual experiences. Informants have enduring commitments to gender equality and social justice among other beliefs. Throughout their lives, social norms regarding gender and sexuality have broadened from strict, hegemonic heteropatriarchal expectations to a landscape that, if still hegemonically heteropatriarchal, holds more options for women and other groups (Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman 2011). Participants thus navigated youth, adulthood, and later life amid changing norms surrounding gender, pleasure, relationships, and (gendered) agency; and notably, they actively rejected the traditional understandings of sex as they aged in favor of adopting more egalitarian and less normative perspectives, often amending beliefs in response to more information. More than passive recipients of history, they are politically engaged and critically aware of social power, most having participated in some form of political activism. They, like all of us, are both subjects and augmentors of the zeitgeist.

My interlocutors are largely critical of traditional beliefs regarding femininity and the role of women, even at times when these beliefs bucked the status quo. With the strong influence of traditional gender norms on the sexual behavior of women, progressive women who do *not* adhere to these beliefs are of great interest to sex research because their personal beliefs conflict with the social norms that overwhelmingly guide women's sexual behavior. Participants' sexual histories, in fact, confirm that traditional gendered expectations often belied women's ability to exert agency or experience pleasure, but they also demonstrate how progressive women actively problematized harmful gender roles throughout their lives. Their experiences also shed light on the impact of background structural and cultural changes on sexual behavior, exemplifying the interlocking impacts of societal, interpersonal, and personal factors on sexual behavior. These collected testimonies indicate that my interlocutors exerted more sexual agency and pleasure as they aged, due increased options (i.e. external changes) and evolving personal life trajectories (i.e. internal changes). They demonstrate that engaging with the everpresent and multi-faceted concept of gender is imperative to understanding these shifts in attitudes and sexual experiences. The analysis of their testimonies is divided in three parts to account for the distinct influences on sexual behavior: structural change, gender socialization, and sexual dynamics.

This study broadly asks: *What are the sexual scripts utilized by cisgender women with progressive political ideologies? How does progressive political ideology shape women's sexual conduct across the life course? What challenges and possibilities emerge for women whose beliefs conflict with dominant ideals of heteropatriarchal femininity and sexuality?* Feminist theory has successfully posited that under patriarchy, women are oppressed and their agency is subordinated to men's authority, a subjugation which extends into the defining female sexuality around male pleasure (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips 2003, Rubin 1997, MacKinnon 1982).

Central to my inquiry is the question: *how has informants' ability to exert sexual agency and experience sexual pleasure changed throughout their lives?* And its sibling: *to what extent has this change been the effect of societal evolution, personal growth with age, or shifting interpersonal dynamics?*

Social power affecting pleasure and sex

A large body of research combines feminist perspectives and sexology to study how power dynamics and social factors affect sexual experiences and pleasure (Sennott & Hawkins 2022, Cense 2018, Carpenter 2010, Byers 1996). This research grounds psychological analysis with robust understandings of the mutual construction of gender and sex, intersectionality, and the scripted nature of social reality (Brickell 2006, Crenshaw 1989, William & Gagnon 1984). Researchers interested in the lived experience of sexuality favor qualitative approaches, often basing analysis on interviews with open-ended questions or focus groups to acquire detailed descriptions of their sexual experiences, rather than surveys with preplanned answers (Sennott & Hawkins 2022, Papp & McClelland 2021). However, quantitative approaches across different subfields of psychology dominate inquiries into the relationship between political orientations and sexual behavior, which use representative data to learn how different variables are statistically correlated (Hatemi, Crabtree & McDermott 2017; Haidt & Hersh 2001; Michael 1994). The nature of quantitative analyses precludes context as to *how* political orientations impact sexual conduct. Through qualitative interviews, I conduct a deeper exploration of how individuals negotiate political ideology and sexuality in their personal experiences.

Past academic research on sex and the effect of gender favors the sexual behavior of college students and focus on "hook ups" as scenes where social knowledge coalesce to create gendered expectations of sexual encounters, both because this demographic is especially sexually

active and convenient due to proximity (Sennott & Hawkins 2022, Papp & McClelland 2021). Consequently, investigations skew toward a specific demographic and inadvertently overrepresents the behavior of college students with reproductive capabilities. In the past fifteen years, sexuality in later life and the effects of aging on sexuality has garnered increased academic interest (Waite 2019, Patterson & Jehan 2024). This burgeoning field plays close attention to the impact of gender socialization and norms on sex and has questioned how aging affects sexual behavior, representing previously neglected experiences (Bastian, Miller & Carpenter 2021). By studying older women with progressive political beliefs, my work reveals the discursive role of liberal political ideology in sexuality whereby participants experience and evaluate sex using the logic of their political beliefs. This reveals how progressive women's beliefs play a significant role in determining the content of women's sexual scripts, skewing toward more egalitarian sexual behavior and satisfactory sexual experiences.

Sara McClelland (2010) argues that the concepts of "satisfaction" and "pleasure" lack sufficient consideration of individuals' differing expectations. McClelland explains that structural experiences of inequality can affect sexual expectations, rendering research unreliable or incomplete, if not altogether inaccurate. McClelland argues that "sexual satisfaction must include theories and methods that systematically consider the role of social and sexual stigmas as antecedents to sexual satisfaction ratings." My work furthers a contextual understanding of satisfaction and pleasure by examining how women's gender socialization in particular influences their expectations for sexual satisfaction and pleasure. In addition to differing expectations, scholarship has emphasized the role of sexual agency, "the strategic negotiations of an individual to situate oneself and one's choices in a social context, make relationships and make sense of experiences (Cense 2018: 250)." Sexual agency considers an individual's ability

to exert their will in sexual situations. My analysis understands sexual agency as contextually variable throughout individuals' sexual histories and analyzes how increases in sexual agency affect gendered sexual behavior.

Theoretical Framework

To adequately analyze the multi-directional impact of gender on participants' sexuality, I employ a *multiscalar feminist sociological analysis* to address both how individuals traverse through life affected by structures of inequality and how these macrostructures themselves exist and mutate, affecting large swathes of the population, often along identity markers (Parreñas and Hwang 2023).[1] Societal, interpersonal, and personal forces impact the lives of individuals in complex, interlocking ways, conceptualizable as three overlaid levels of interaction. The societal scale refers to structures, phenomena, events, or ideas with impersonal and mass reach, such as institutions, social movements, popular media, commercial products, etc. This macro-level acknowledges that individuals exist within larger structures they constantly interact with and depend on. The social scale encompasses interaction between individuals. The personal scale represents the individual and their psyche.

In evaluating sexuality, I borrow Laura Carpenter's (2010) multidisciplinary conceptual model "Gendered Sexuality over the Life Course Framework (GSLC)," focusing on the ways women with critical, left-leaning beliefs navigate sex throughout their lives. This approach argues that gender and sexuality are entangled embodied experiences that often mutually define each other. Gender is a salient category that significantly impacts sexual expectations, behavior, self-conceptualization, timing of sexual experiences, and more (Carpenter 2010, Brickell 2006,

[1] Parreñas & Hwang 2023 propose the *multiscalar feminist sociological analysis* to remedy inadequate explorations of transnational feminism, which focus more on identity than inequality and neglect the interlocking ways global and local contexts produce inequality. I adapt this model by using scales that represent the three distinct levels of sexual behavior (social-cultural, interpersonal, intrapsychic) widely agreed upon in psychology and sex research (Gagnon & Simon 1986). The social-cultural level refers to collective meanings, but I amend this definition to refer to any interaction happening on the societal-level.

Connell 1987, Millet 1978). The GSLC model argues that sexuality should be viewed within an individual's life course to account for the ways meaning is contextual, evolves, and is informed by past sexual experiences. I employ this perspective by speaking with older women who can reflect on the impact of gender consciousness throughout their lives and problematize early sexual behavior. I showcase how women learned to "do gender," how they contested certain gender performances throughout their lives, and the effect of these shifts, refusals, and reformation on sex.

I consider gender both as a political designation and a personal identity marker to account for the structural *and* individual facets and consequences of gender. Catharine MacKinnon (1982) argues "sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society (MacKinnon 1982: 516)." The organization of "social beings" is the groundwork for my macro-level analysis. Rather than a set of traits individuals embody, gender is the "product of social doings" where individuals perform actions that reaffirm or contest gender socialization and whose meaning is underpinned by social norms (Horne & Molborn 2020, West & Zimmerman 1987: 27, Blumer 1969). In this view, the individual plays an active role in reproducing or rejecting gender through constant performance of actions that reaffirm their intended gender (Butler 2006). I use this perspective to understand that individuals reproduce gender *within* sexual contexts and to inquire how participants interact with sexual norms that disadvantage them as women.

I use sexual script theory to analyze changes in the sexual behavior of participants. William & Gagnon (1984) argue that people rely on sexual scripts to decide how, when, and with whom to have sex. Scripts act as guides for how to behave in different sexual situations

(Wiederman 2015; William & Gagnon 1986). Throughout their lives, individuals acquire useful sexual scripts to help them navigate sex, often functioning as rules individuals follow. I evaluate both how participants acquired gendered sexual scripts, and how across their life course, participants problematized and undid disadvantageous gendered scripts. I broadly understand sex as any actions which aim to arouse or pleasure oneself or others which is how participants defined sex during interviews.

Lastly, my analysis necessarily includes a nuanced consideration of the ways gender and heterosexual ideas impact participants' sexuality over time. While background social change has destabilized traditional ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality for my interlocutors, large scale social change may not be experienced in a linear fashion nor equitably among interlocutors. Individuals' and American society's stories are not inherently progressive (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith 2007), and in order to account for the situated nature of self-constitution and the uneven impact of shifting cultural idea(l), I employ a topological understanding of the spread of feminist and modernizing forces emerging at the turn of the 20th century. This topological consideration of social change emphasizes multiplicity, uneven spatiality, and entanglements (Murphy 2012), foregrounding individuality, heterogeneity, and even contradiction within an evolving social landscape that is nevertheless shared and directional. Concurrently, an exploration of gender and sexuality that does not consider other power structures, such as class or race, would be shallow and an inaccurate distillation of reality. While I am interested in the impact of gender, I do not view women as a monolithic class with shared collective experiences. With an intersectional perspective, I explain how women's differing social identities and experiences affect their experience and performance of womanhood (Choo & Ferree 2010, Crenshaw 1991).

Methodology

This qualitative study was guided by a feminist interpretive epistemology. An interpretive epistemology believes researchers can acquire legitimate knowledge from an individual's subjective experiences (Crotty 2015). Thus, this study does not aim to generalize findings across a target population, but to learn *how* participants navigate sex and gendered sexual expectations throughout their lives. A *feminist* interpretive epistemology acknowledges and aims to mitigate the power imbalance between the researcher and participants. While traditional perspectives encourage distance between interviewers and participants, feminist methodologies invite interviewers to acknowledge the personal stake in research and the inevitability of power imbalances, accountability, intimate connections, and shared perspectives that arise in feminist research (Harding & Norberg 2009, Herron 2023, Stanley 1993, Stanley & Wise 1993) As a feminist scholar, I work *with* participants, not just extract from their experiences. As such, I viewed participants both as informants and interlocutors.

I conducted 12 interviews from February to March 2025, each lasting from 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews took place across Chicago on Zoom or through FaceTime (n=9), via phone call (n=2), and in-person (n=1). Each participant was interviewed once. To reduce time, I used AWS Beta Transcription to transcribe the interviews into a block of text, after which I manually separated the text into conversation and corrected any mistakes while listening to the recordings. I used a denaturalized transcription approach to prioritize the content of answers, erasing non-significant filler words and false starts (Oliver, Serovich & Mason 2005, O'Connell & Kowal 1995). As data was being collected, I coded transcripts for themes and wrote qualitative

memos to develop arguments. This process involved constant revision and several returns to coding as new data presented new arguments (Saldana 2015).

Recruitment

Before starting recruitment, this project received expedited status from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Social and Behavioral Division (SBS) as a project posing minimal risk to participants. To recruit participants, I used a variety of methods including tapping into my local networks, snowball sampling, direct recruitment, online and in-person flyers, and contacting local organizations whose clientele fit my target population. I specified that I sought to interview women ages 50-75 living in Chicago about how their sexual attitudes evolved throughout their lives. I chose a cohort of older adult women because they have more life and sexual experience to reflect on (e.g. pregnancy, menopause). Due to their proximity to the sexual revolution, they are also more likely to have grown when traditional sexual norms were more dominant. I did not intentionally target women with progressive beliefs, *but* by all women who showed interest held left-leaning beliefs. This revealed that the women most open to speaking about sex often espoused liberal political ideologies, hinting at a relationship between sexual openness and political beliefs. In response, I pivoted to discover how political beliefs influenced sexuality. I attended local events of organizations likely to attract liberal-minded women in my target age group, including women-owned businesses, feminist groups, political groups focusing on women, cultural centers, and bookshops. Both in recruiting materials and in-person pitches, I stated that I am studying how social expectations affect individual sexuality, emphasizing that I intend to ask questions about participants' sexual experiences. In preliminary conversations and during interviews, I made sure to tell my participants about my personal epistemology: everyone can tell us more about society through their personal experiences.

Participants

The participants are 12 cisgender women ages 51-77 living in the Chicagoland area. They have all lived in Chicago–a famously liberal Midwestern city–for at least twenty years. All women hold social and political beliefs self-described as liberal, progressive, or leftist. Because this project aims to study gendered sexual experience, I aimed to recruit a diverse group of women and succeeded in recruiting women of various socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Most participants came from middle class (n=6) and working class backgrounds (n=5), with one participant coming from an upper middle class background. Racially, most of the participants are white Americans (n=9) with the exception of one Latina woman, one biracial woman, and a Black woman. All participants attended college (n=9) or trade school (n=3). Five participants also attended graduate school, skewing my sample toward well-educated women, reflecting the broader trend of more educated women leaning liberal. Likewise, all women are professionals or retired professionals. Most participants identify as heterosexual (n=10), but the majority experienced at least one sexual experience with a woman (n=8). One participant identifies as a lesbian, and one identifies as queer. Despite differing sexual orientations, gender socialization affected all participants in similar ways.

Most participants are involved in political activism and well-versed in social issues regarding women, to different degrees. They are seasoned political organizers (n=6), active in some form of social justice activity (n=5), or at least hold liberal beliefs about social justice (n=1). There were two reasons women participated: largely to support a young researcher studying sexuality and/or they were interested in talking about their sexuality. Three participants in particular experienced significant sexual turning points (coming out as queer, recently divorcing their first husband, being widowed) in the past year they wanted to discuss.

Procedure

After initial context, I reached out to participants via text or email at their preference with an extended explanation of the project, measures I will take to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, permission to record audio of our interview, and scheduling times.

Before starting each interview, I gave each participant a verbal consent handout with information about my project, contact information of my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) which supervises research with human subjects, and with three optional elements. They were then asked to confirm their choices for the optional elements while being recorded.

All participants were asked the same questions from a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions of my creation (Leech 2002). I began by personal information such as age, race/ethnicity, place of origin, religious beliefs, marital status, if they had children, and political beliefs. Next, I asked participants to define some common, but charged, terms: woman, sex, and sexuality. Then, I asked questions starting from how the participant learned about sex through their sexual experiences to the present. Lastly, I asked some reflective questions about sexual violence, gender norms in sex, and change across time. All participants were asked the same questions from an interview guide that was modified once after the first two interviews.

I Societal level: how reproductive technology, women's liberation, and increased information availability affected the sexual scripts

Background events beyond personal experience shaped the sexual conduct of participants by delineating and delimiting sexual possibilities in explicitly gendered ways. The following section highlights how a variety of background changes affected the options and conceptions of women.

Risk and birth control

The availability of the birth control pill gave women more sexual autonomy in ways that destabilized the previously dominant protective sexual scripts *and* opened the possibility for casual or recreational sex without pregnancy risk (Agree 2017, Kao 2000).[2] Once women had access to birth control, the expansion of their sexual agency was consistent, but whether women *could* access oral contraceptives largely depended on socioeconomic status and the particularities of each woman's family and early sexual experiences. Social historians have also drawn attention to the barriers to access the birth control pill in the 1960s, such social stigma and medical infrastructure (Bailey 1997).

Etta (77), a Black woman and retired civil rights attorney, became sexually active *before* the birth control pill was available or accessible to her. She explains the reality of sex and risk when she was younger:

> There was a lot of, and we're back to it sadly, what if I get pregnant? What does it mean? What will he think? Will he take care of him? Will he love it? It wasn't just the excitement of it, at least for me, and in my history, it was the consequence of it. [Most of my friends] would not have sex with anybody that you would not at least want to see again and at some point may have a long-term relationship with, and again, that was because there was no real contraceptives in the way that there is [now], and the disease AIDS and some other things were coming out that for many of us, we're like, "Nah I ain't doing this cause I ain't gonna risk it." It was risky both from a pregnancy standpoint [and] from a health standpoint.

Without birth control measures, pregnancy was an imminent and nearly unavoidable risk of sexual intercourse, tempering the decision to have sex with the weight of a potential lifetime commitment. Notably, Etta acknowledges that women today *still* experience the uncertainty she did because of recent state and federal legislation attacking and limiting access to reproductive healthcare, including abortion access, oral birth control, condoms, and more (Ray 2025). Due to the risk inherent to sex, Etta only had sex with serious partners and pointedly avoided casual sex

[2] When referring to birth control, informants overwhelmingly discussed oral birth control as the main safeguard against pregnancy; ergo, this section mostly focuses on the impact of the birth control pill.

due to concern about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), something that would change later in life when she *did* have access to oral birth control and abortion care:

> As I got older, and again it was more being able to take birth control pills, and all that didn't exist and all that. You know, we got to be, "Wait, let's have some fun. I don't care if I see you again"….I got older and there were more avenues for not having anything, and I could have an abortion, which I did have it. I got pregnant and didn't want to. I mean a lot of it had to do with availability, of what was available beyond just having the sex.

Etta directly attributes her decision to engage in casual sex later in life to the availability of oral birth control and reproductive care like abortion, which both gave her control over pregnancy. Her account shows how the availability of birth control changed sexual scripts *within* one lifetime, whereas most other informants exemplify the change of scripts *across* generations.

Participants had uneven access to birth control, with women who grew up in working-class neighborhoods describing delayed access compared to other participants. While Etta did not have access to oral birth control or abortion care until later adulthood–seemingly around her 30s, the three other participants in their 70s were able to access birth control as teenagers or young adults. Ruth (75), Jewish woman and a lifelong social justice advocate, talks about access and risk when in college:

> Contraception in the 60s meant using condoms or birth control pills…At that point in time, students could use the health service at the university and [go] on the pill, which was a big deal back then. It wasn't *uncommon* in a university setting, but it wasn't something you necessarily spent a lot of time talking about. So, I think I started on birth control pills, maybe… a year or two before I got married. So I wasn't on birth control pills, but I certainly knew about taking precautions because, and in those days and in my life, sex was a part of dating and being with people. And it wasn't, at least for me, something that I did with just everybody, but you knew that you had to be cautious.

Ruth concurs with Etta about the inherent risk of sexual relations when growing up, showing the same prudence when choosing to have sex, but Ruth accessed oral birth control in her early 20s through her university, a "big deal" at the time. She gained protection from pregnancy sooner in life than Etta due to her access to healthcare at a liberal and prestigious university. Etta accessed oral contraceptives years after she had given birth to her first daughter. Thus, the personal

circumstances of informants' lives mediate the effects of exigent factors like structural access to birth control.

For the most part, informants had access to birth control by the time they had their first sexual experiences. Etta and Elizabeth (62) are the two exceptions. Elizabeth, a white woman, grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Chicago. Like Etta, she associated sex with the risk of pregnancy in youth, but unlike Etta, she did not believe sex was worth the risk:

> A lot of what sex meant was you would get pregnant. And even though I knew about birth control, we pretty much talked about that as condoms, and I guess we knew about the pill that was certainly out there, but I never even thought of trying to get it because I think my goal mostly was not to have sex.

Elizabeth describes *knowing* about birth control, but intending to remain celibate. However, Elizabeth had unplanned sex a few times as a teenager and young adult, and in both instances, her partners–who were the initiators of sex–never used birth control or spoke about it. In one instance, she actually felt pregnant, exemplifying how precarious sex could be and the risk for women. Her male partners did not need to worry about falling pregnant, so the responsibility of contraception fell on her hands. Today, the burden of contraception continues to disproportionately fall on women, including both physical and mental work to prevent pregnancy (Kimport 2018).

Younger participants, aside from Elizabeth, did not mention birth control or risk of pregnancy aside from mentioning they were on the pill so they *didn't* need to worry about pregnancy. Even some older participants on the pill describe different perspectives than Etta, Ruth, and Elizabeth, who all associated sex with risk. Anne (72), an artist from a Chicago suburb, started using birth control at sixteen to treat hormonal dysregulation. When asked about her early sexual experiences, Anne said, "I was on the pill, so I didn't have to worry about stuff. My mother told me when I was 11 years old, she said, 'You don't know how lucky you are,' when the pill came out." As her mother's ominous words suggest, Anne understood the reality

for women before access to the birth control pill. Her mother married her childhood sweetheart, never had sex with another man, and remained in an unhappy marriage until she died.

Older participants, or people without access to the pill, needed to plan carefully and take care of themselves, while the availability of birth control erased this need and opened the possibility of sex without commitment. For women born earlier, age and personal circumstance leads to different life course trajectories, exemplifying the importance of contextualizing contraception with lived experiences.

Women's Liberation and Civil Rights Movements

The Women's Liberation movement directly and symbolically affected the sexual trajectory of my interlocutors by increasing their ability to be self-sufficient. Women's liberationists advocated for social change and legislation to target gender-discrimination, reproductive rights, equal pay, and other feminist efforts from the 1960s-1980s (Gilmore 2023: 162). Together, the birth control pill and Women's Liberation efforts spawned a "sexual revolution" that challenged traditional gender roles and oppressive patriarchal structures (Herzog & Yanara 2024). However, the Women's Liberation movement largely focused on the rights of *white* women. As a black woman, Etta (77) benefited much more from the Civil Rights Movement. In hindsight, most participants agree social change in the 1960s was less liberation and more so *some* progress, but women across all age groups describe how change in this decade significantly broadened their life trajectories from their mothers' available opportunities as young women. The knowledge that their mothers had fewer opportunities than them encouraged participants to prioritize independence and appreciate their sexual agency.

Before the changes of the sexual revolution, many participants' mothers depended on the wage of their husband in a traditional breadwinner-housewife dynamic and were sometimes fully

subservient to the will of their husbands. Patty (71) and Anne (72) in particular both came of age during the sexual revolution and were determined to be self-sufficient. Patty recounts how the difficulties women faced:

> We didn't have a path, except to be wives and mothers. We didn't have a direction because nobody ever talked about how to be a professional woman, they never said that…. All of it had to do with previous restrictions on women owning credit cards, getting jobs, I think. Even getting jobs other than menial, servient jobs. I mean, everybody I knew was gonna be either a waitress or a nurse. And nursing is a wonderful profession, but back in the 60s and the 70s, nursing was a profession where women were just castigated and looked down upon by the male doctor population, it was, and then also sexually harassed, so that was a bad thing too…. We wanted to be independent. We wanted to establish an independence that had nothing to do with our marital status.

Rather than following the limited forged path, Patty became a working professional who could maintain herself independently, gaining more power and agency over her life. As a young woman, Patty also felt *sexually* liberated by the changing social position of women and the revolutionary protection from the birth control pill, marking her decision to engage in casual sex have a political edge:

> Back in the day, if we met someone we liked, it was not unusual for you to just have sex with them on the first date. Maybe the second, but whatever. And then after that you made a decision about whether or not you wanted to be part of that relationship, but it wasn't until you did that you didn't ever make a decision about your relationship.

Sex outside marriage was a political act for Patty: women before her could not have sex without major risks. Anne shared how her mother explicitly encouraged her to exercise her right to have sex too, advising Anne to have sex with a man before you marry him *and* to not marry the first man she sleeps with, an opportunity Anne's mother did not have as she married her childhood sweetheart. Anne followed her advice and mostly had sex *before* entering into relationships.

While she heeded her mother's advice, Anne found herself in a relationship similar to her parents' in her twenties. Her boyfriend was a musician and even took her wages from work, holding great control over her. He had also been physically abusive. She only left the relationship after the sudden death of her mom, realizing she deserved to be happy:

> So, I get a phone call because I'm kicked out of the house, I'm living down in Chicago, to find out that [my mother's] dead. And I was close to my mother. And that was the turning point with the second relationship. I thought, you know what? I don't wanna be unhappy like my mother was unhappy. I want somebody I can be happy with. You only got one life. And my mother always told me, she said, "Go play the field." That's what she told me. My mother got married to my father, they were high school sweethearts. She was a virgin when she got married. Can you imagine that?

The weight of her mother's oppression and unhappiness ultimately changed her trajectory by raising her standards for romantic partners and refusing to stay with a partner who mistreats her. She also took her mother's suggestion to play the field seriously and began prioritizing sexual satisfaction. Anne only dated men who she had satisfying sex with, eventually entering a marriage with frequent satisfying sex.

Most participants are white women, who were most impacted by their social identities as women or their socioeconomic status. As a Black woman, Etta was affected by anti-Black structural racism, and she directed her efforts as an activist to support the Civil Rights Movement. She grew up in Chicago under Jim Crow and experienced many barriers because of her skin color, such as frequent racial profiling from police and exclusion from institutions–such as some law schools–solely due to her identity as a Black woman. Things began changing when she was in her 20s:

> A lot of what was going on when my daughter was born in the late 60s, '68, had to do with the civil rights movement, and so there was much more cognizant understanding of race and gender than it had been when I was growing up. And so it made, for me anyway, particularly once I became a single parent, it made it a bit easier for me to do what I needed to do, like buy my first home as a single mom, because women, even black women, were being moved up.

Even though she did not directly participate in any women's movements, Etta supported and benefited from the gains of liberationists. "Even Black women were being moved up," she says. She recognizes that Black women were distinct from "women," which often homogeneously represents white women and their experiences. Still, women's liberationists improved social status and legal protection of women, ostensibly giving all women political power. Many

informants, like Patty and Anne, witnessed a radical change in their trajectories, as their mothers had always been wives and mothers who were confined in the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, Etta was raised by a single mother and descended from enslaved grandparents. She also knew many trailblazing women before her who were already supporting themselves outside a traditional patriarchal structure. She shares:

> So I think that for me, it's not me as much as following in the path of those who led the way behind the scenes…. When I think about who I am on the shoulders of a woman whose mother was a descendant of freed slaves, who came here with less than 9th grade education, and I have 3 degrees, and my daughters both have master's degrees. So we are on the shoulders of that woman, we have 7 degrees, so when I try to talk to younger people and particularly younger people of color and Black women, Black girls, you know, it's possible. Even though all of what we're seeing now is taking us back from DEI from affirmative action, we are still, none of that existed when I was growing up, and here I am. So we can fight the fight the same way.

Undoubtedly, Etta's experience must be contextualized by chattel slavery in America and persistent structural discrimination against Black people in America. The afterlives of slavery include the financial exploitation and expropriation of Black individuals' labor (Blackmon 2008). Unlike middle and upper-class white women, Black–and working-class–women have always been expected to work and also had lower wages (Women's Fund of Greater Cincinnati 2020). The benefits of Women's Liberation were understandably overshadowed by Civil Rights advances for Black individuals. Etta already knew how to be self-sufficient due to her family and social background, while white informants like Anne and Patty had different social realities and gendered experiences.

With more legal protections and work opportunities came a cultural shift in respect and attitudes towards women. Participants witnessed the unquestioned hold of heteropatriarchy and the power of men over their wives lose its hegemony. In all my interviews, there was some mention of "how it used to be" for women, a starkly different reality where women had no agency. Like Etta here:

> At one point, I had an abortion…. And my then fiance accepted it. I mean, some of what I thought and did would not have been accepted by my first husband because back then women didn't, women didn't get to make those decisions, you know, so.

Women didn't get to make those decisions portrays the dominant conception of women as passive individuals subordinate to men's wills. This cohort of participants actively made decisions women didn't get to make throughout their lives which contributed to changing the zeitgeist.

Younger women were more aware of the impact of these social movements on their parents than they were about life pre-birth control, meaning the weight behind birth control and pregnancy risk does not remain as salient for many participants when talking about sexuality. Many women reflected on the opportunities they had that their mothers did not have. Daniela (57), a queer Latina who hails from downtown Chicago, reflects on her mother encouraging her to attend college and start a professional career:

> My mom was born in the 40s, and she grew up in a world where, you know, you were a housewife. I mean, my mom was a housewife. She didn't go to college, and her role is to take care of the home and the kids…. I think there were some unhappy years between my parents where she thought about getting divorced. She never did…I think that's when my sister and I were teenagers, and she was drilling into us, "You have to go to college, you have to get a degree, you have to have a career, you have to be able to make money. You can't be reliant on someone else."

Although not related directly to sexual intercourse, the social change from women expected to be housewives, mothers, or work pink-collar jobs while *still* handling all childcare to more open opportunities changed the context of sex for women. As Patty and Daniela's mother emphasized, women now had the option to be financially independent and escape patriarchal domination within the home. Symbolically and literally at times, women were subservient to their husbands and men in general. The weight of their mother's relative deprivation motivated women to pursue lifestyles outside of traditional, subservient feminine roles.

Increased information about sex and rewriting traditional sexual understandings

Across their lives, my interlocutors witnessed an exponential increase in available information about sex and a decrease in taboo surrounding open discussions about sex. Consequently, participants actively reconfigured and expanded their understanding of sex to complicate the simplistic, heteronormative paradigm for sex all participants grew up learning. Heteronormativity is the pervasive belief that there are two distinct and opposing genders with natural characteristics inherent to their identity and the assumption that everyone is heterosexual (van der Toorn, Pliskin & Morgenroth 2020), characteristics that extend to sexual roles. While my informants consciously rewrote heteronormative sexual scripts, they also emphasize how their beliefs are much more acceptable today than before, signaling a somewhat external cultural shift they individually contribute to. Etta (77) captures the openness participants describe sexuality and gender having today as opposed to a more *limited* and *hidden* past:

> So sex and gender and all of that is very, I think it's probably more *revealed* now than it was back then, but it was still there. I mean, it was just more *hidden* and, and quite frankly, it was more *limited*, as defined, as opposed to it as it is now. (Emphasis mine)

Sex and gender changed both in terms of exposure and form. Older participants especially state they knew very little information about sex growing up; there were no graphic depictions, nudity, or many open discussions about the topic. The discussion about sex which existed was limited to heterosexual dynamics. Penelope (62), a medical professional with strong Eastern Orthodox ties, distinguishes between the traditional understanding of sex from her current conceptualization :

> Well there is a definition in the dictionary. I'm sure it's man and a woman and performing it in a traditional way, but it can be to people coming together and enjoying each other's bodies, and behaviors whereby the other each enjoys the behaviors of the other, and kind of being satisfied, aroused, comforted in in a physical way that can only be done with a person that you are attracted to, maybe not in love with, but that you have this connection physically that could have an outcome that is satiating, and the word I wanna say, appreciated and welcomed.

The “traditional way” is heterosexual penile-vaginal penetration, but like Penelope, *all* participants described sex today in terms of intimacy and satisfaction. When I asked Elizabeth (62) if there was any mention of non-heterosexual sex when she was growing up she said, “Oh no, oh no. In fact, I would say that again, it's not something that you always want to say out loud to people except to say, well, this is what it was like when I was that age, and we didn't seem to know better, and nobody corrected us.” She recounted her ignorance with shame, underscoring how as progressive women today care deeply about holding non-exclusionary beliefs about sex. They believe heteronormative conceptions cause harm by excluding the experiences of non-heterosexual experiences.

For the oldest participants, explicit references to sex tended to be sanitized and reinforce traditional sex roles. Participants share that nudity and sexuality were rarely depicted on television when they grew up. Ruth (75) says that on television “the initiators were almost never women. That much I can tell you. That it was relegated to males wanting or having sex.” Her account exemplifies how media creates and reinforces certain cultural sexual scripts, namely that men initiate sex and that men are the ones who *want* sex, a message which centers male pleasure in sexual experiences. All informants in their 70s also do not recall any conversations about sex with their parents or sufficient instruction in sexual education programs in school. Anne (72) states the latter “were a joke, complete joke, you know…They never told us what to do so it was just like, well, you're on your own” Sexual education included teaching students the biology behind sex and pregnancy, but never giving advice on how to pursue relationships.

Participants in their 50s and 60s shared more instances of learning about sex directly from their parents, exemplifying the actions that accumulate in the cultural change many

participants describe. Debbie (69), a white Chicago native from a working-class background shares:

> I have to give my parents so much kudos because when I was probably 7 or 8….They literally just sat, we sat down at the kitchen table and they told us about sex as leading to pregnancy, and the idea that when, and again, at that time it was when men and women are in love, they just love each other very much. And my mom goes, so they'll get really close and hug, and the man puts his penis inside the woman's vagina, and then sometimes there's a baby, and it was very progressive in the early 1960s for parents to talk to kids that way.

This early example shows how parents began teaching their children about sex, signifying how it became a topic children must have information about. Even parents from more conservative backgrounds, like Daniela's (57) mother, took steps to ensure their children had information about sex. "My parents were very Catholic," she said. "My mom had this statement like, 'Well, if you have any questions, ask us.' It's like, are you crazy?" The transition to more sexual discourse was not seamless: parents like Daniela's may have offered space to discuss sex, but Daniela felt it was outlandish to discuss sex with her conservative parents. Michelle (54), biracial woman who grew up in a Chicagoland suburb, shares how her parents also struggled to discuss sex, but she was able to "go that next step" with her daughters:

> I was raised where there was no shame in [sex] at all, but my parents, their generation, they didn't talk about it a whole lot…And it was clearly uncomfortable for them to talk about it. But yet, they wanted me to know the information and they were like, everything's fine, everything is normal, but you could just tell that they were like [not into talking about it], so I was able to go that next step [with my girls], right? So I feel it's just a generational thing.

Her parents gave her instructional books about puberty, bodies, and sex as early teenagers, but they still held the characteristic discomfort with sexual discussion older generations had. Michelle expands she was able to speak about sex without shame and eventually had franker discussions about sex with *her* children than her parents could. This generational sequence of social change demonstrates how parents remedied their lack of knowledge about sex by providing their children with what they consider to be necessary information. Like Michelle,

informants with children intentionally gave them robust sexual educations to make sure they were equipped to navigate sexual experiences without the shame and normative prescriptions they grew up with.

My interlocutors expanded their definitions of sex as they aged, facilitated by increased public discourse of sex. While describing a broader cultural shift away from heteronormativity dominating sex, they actively contribute to cultural shifts by adopting more egalitarian and penetrative-centered views on sex. Participants also reveal the role of parents taking more active steps to ensure children received better sexual education, helping break stigma across generations.

II Personal level: gender socialization negatively affecting sex

Gender socialization refers to the process by which a child learns the rules, norms, meaning, codes of conduct according to their specific gender (Stockard 2006, Stanley & Wise 1993). As women, my informants describe learning to behave in gendered ways, such as behaving passive in relation to men. They describe how gendered socialization constrained the way women behaved and how they evaluated their self-worth when they reached sexual maturity, often encouraging conformity with norms that disadvantaged women. This section demonstrates how participants struggled with gendered expectations beginning in adolescence. Gender socialization often limited women's agency and valorized the attention of pleasure of men in sexual experiences, ultimately impairing informants' pleasure.

Passivity undermining sexual communication

Participants who were socialized to behave passively describe varying ways adherence to passivity negatively affected their sexual experiences, especially when they were younger. Women struggled both to communicate their sexual needs and to say no to unwanted sexual

experience. They understand passive sexual behavior as just one example of the negative impacts of passivity. Passivity and submissiveness have been traditionally and stereotypically naturalized as feminine qualities women to counter the agentic, assertive male, but over the past 60 years such beliefs have been deconstructed and demystified as socially constructed qualities of people (McCreary and Rhodes 2001, Lorber 1994). Even participants who were not socialized to be passive recognized the cultural valoration of passivity, sometimes conforming to this ideal to be more attractive.

Patty (71) states that today women are taught to ask for the things they want, in contrast to how she was raised to behave:

> I think that women have been taught that they shouldn't be afraid to ask for the things that they want. To orgasm. To a seat at the table. I think that we're still learning how to put those requests in our own words. I think that we still struggle to be both strong and appropriately diminutive. I know that that sounds weird, but, you know, I think that that's something that I've always had to deal with. I would like to sit in a room full of [men] and be like, "No, you're wrong," but you know I've been trained not to say those words. I've been trained to say to men, "Oh, that's close, but maybe like this," rather than going, "What are you stupid? You should do it better," which is the way that we've always been talked to, but, you know, women don't talk like that. So I think these are the constraints that we continue to feel. We have a…different speaking voice from men. We know that we have a right to have a seat at the table, and we know that we have a right to ask for an orgasm, but we don't yet have command of that, those expressions, those requests, those demands, those whatevers, it's always challenging for me as a woman to make those requests.

Her account illustrates how the power imbalance between men and women is maintained. Women were trained to accept any circumstance without complaint, never learning to express agency. Even though she consciously disagrees with this belief, Patty still struggles to exert her will, to plainly express her opinion without coddling men with supplicating language. This illustrates how women internalize and embody gender socialization so deeply that undoing such scripts is extremely difficult. Although she knows she "has the right to ask for an orgasm," she has difficulty making those requests and behaving without performing feminine passivity, demonstrating how gender norms inhibit sexual agency and communication.

Michelle (54) did not grow up with parents who emphasized passivity, but when she reached puberty she realized that boys "want you to act feminine. You should not be stronger than them, or that's not gonna be attractive to them." She learned from personal experience that boys do not like strong, assertive girls and adopted more diminutive traits: "Like I started to learn the way boys thought of women, and how you need to be in order to attract one." Michelle weakened herself because to attract boys as a girl you had to behave subordinately, underscoring the normalized dominance of men over women in heterosexual dynamics. Even if women grow up without patriarchal gender socializations, they still live in a culture that idealizes strength in men and demureness in women.

Daniela (57) shares how her passive socialization strongly constrained her ability to navigate sexual situations. In her words, her first sexual experiences were,

> Not great, not pleasurable. I mean, I think I liked kissing. And maybe I was OK with, you know, like going to first base, but I did not like the rest of it. I was really uncomfortable with intercourse, I really did not experience any pleasure. I thought it was painful. You know, I sort of wish that I could have been more assertive to be like, "No, I don't want to do this." But I think I was really conditioned to just go along with what other people wanted.

She did not want to do more than kissing for her boyfriend, but she did not know how to say no to her boyfriend. Daniela ties her inability to say no to her conditioning. Gender socialization teaches people how to interact with the world, and if that includes "going along with what other people want" women do not learn how to behave in sexual situations that require opposing the wants of others. The conflict between passivity and sexual communication can result in women like Daniela consenting to unwanted sex, something which women themselves retrospectively identify.

Desirability, gendered expectations, and sexuality

Participants experience entangled relationships between gendered expectations, desirability, and sexuality which often affected their self-perception, especially earlier in life. My

interlocutors describe pressure to meet beauty standards and garner male interest. They also often attributed their failure at attracting male partners to their looks, causing personal distress. In one case, adhering to the beauty standard meant following white standards of beauty, exemplifying how the social hierarchy of race intersects with gender to make white feminine qualities the ideal standard for women.

Informants were taught to value beauty outside of sexual contexts, forging a strong hold on women independent of the relationship between beauty and male desirability. Debbie (69) shares learning to always wear make up as a girl:

> My mom and my grandmother, who lived with us, always put on their face in the morning. They wore makeup and not over exaggerated, but that was part of what was important to them, and so I grew up wearing makeup most of my life and only since, I mean, I still wear a little makeup, but I like to play with makeup…. I think it's been only probably the last 10 years to know where I have had a much better understanding of the authenticity of our physical beauty, body and makeup and hair and clothes, which, quite honestly, has been a great relief.

Debbie was conditioned to "doing gender" by putting on makeup, maintaining a nice appearance, and overall striving to fit the beauty ideal. When they reached sexual maturity, participants experienced beauty standards and sexuality as related measures of self-worth. Connie (62) shares how self-consciousness about her looks motivated a sexual experience she did not want:

> Since, I always kind of felt somewhat ugly duckling-ish, I think I made out with this guy that I didn't really like, and he gave me a hickey and I was super freaking embarrassed

Connie shared this with a laugh, but her statement belies how insecurity about her looks influenced her decision to make out with a boy she did not like. It also implies that sexual attention from a boy could negate or at least ameliorate Connie's insecurity in her looks. Her experience demonstrates how women internalize gendered expectations as personal measures of

self-worth. Her words imply that male attention determines who is considered beautiful. That boy she did not like still acted as a judge of her self-worth.

In addition to the weight of beauty standards, non-white women experience the interlocking effect of sexual and racial hierarchies, which often exclude or devalue individuals who do not meet the dominating culture's standards. Michelle is a biracial woman adopted by two white parents, and she experienced alienation as a biracial girl in a predominately white suburb. Her parents also never learned how to style her hair, opting to keep it buzzed–which in of itself reflects willful ignorance of her different needs as a Black child.. During puberty, Michelle became keenly aware that she did not meet the beauty standard around her:

> Puberty hit and I did like boys, but my hair was basically still not handled- Like it was not traditional at all, right, especially for a white suburb. Like everybody looked like Farrah Fawcett… [with] the wavy blonde hair and that wasn't me so I absolutely began to understand that boys want long blonde hair.…It was definitely a frustrating time for me because…there's only so much you can do about your hair, and so I probably didn't really know what to do about my hair until maybe like the end of junior high. I was introduced to a black woman who was like, "Oh sweetheart, let me, let me help you with your hair." So then I started to sort of fall in line with, OK, this is what men are attracted to or boys are attracted to.

Michelle covers many ways that beauty and sexuality impact one's sense of self and gender, and how beauty includes a racial standard that valorizes white female beauty. Prior to puberty and sexualization, Michelle was not preoccupied with her looks or how her hair was different from the girls around her, but during puberty she realized that boys were not attracted to girls that did not view that beauty standard and did not behave in feminine ways. Michelle realized she needed to change her appearance and behavior in order to appeal to boys as she wanted boys to like her. This normal and logical choice shows how individuals are constrained by the norms around them and in order to achieve what they want–in this case being seen as desirable by boys–people take action to conform to those norms. With Michelle, this included conforming more closely to white standards of beauty and because of her familial circumstances, lacking knowledge on how to fully conform.

This relationship between self-worth and desirability was not confined to early adolescence, and was especially salient for women after divorces. Debbie's first marriage ended because her husband fell in love with another woman, and she shares the impacts of that on her self image and sexual activity:

> When we got divorced, I had no other sexual partners because the boyfriend was so infrequent… I don't really even consider myself having sex with him. So anyway, my ex-husband [was really] my only partner. I didn't have any other. So for better or worse, I was really needy of having a man want me, desire me, because my husband didn't desire me anymore.

Because she had few prior sexual experiences and her ex-husband had been her only consistent partner, the end of their marriage was not only emotionally destabilizing but also disrupted her sexual identity. Seeking male attention became a way to reaffirm her desirability and reestablish a sense of feminine value. Her narrative highlights how deeply heterosexual scripts tie women's self-worth to male validation, making sexuality a site where personal loss is entangled with broader gendered expectations. Even in adulthood, Debbie felt compelled to resolve this rupture by securing desire from others, illustrating how normative femininity can leave women vulnerable to crises of self when romantic or sexual validation is withdrawn.

These narratives illustrate how beauty standards, desirability, and gendered sexual expectations are internalized early and reinforced across adulthood, often through formative and traumatic experiences. From Michelle's racialized alienation in adolescence to Debbie's post-divorce crisis of desirability, participants reveal how sexual agency is often negotiated in relation to external norms–especially the male gaze and white beauty ideals. Yet, these stories also show moments of resistance and reevaluation, particularly as participants aged, suggesting the possibility of undoing gendered and racialized scripts even after decades of internalization.

Heteronormativity

All my interlocutors grew up in heteronormative environments where it was presumed all women were sexually attracted to men. Heteronormativity includes the naturalizing of certain qualities, like passivity and beauty, to one of only two genders. This paradigm also diagnoses certain sexual behaviors as acceptable while those that deviate from heterosexual behaviors are seen as unacceptable (Rubin 1984).

The negative consequences of heteronormativity are best exemplified by Mavis (63), a white, lesbian woman who grew up in a conservative and traditional household. Growing up, her parents were sex positive, sharing information about sex with Mavis at a young age, but her mother always emphasized how the best part of life as a woman was sex with a man. So when she was a teenager and not finding any boys to date, Mavis felt inadequate:

> My father used to say… "It's gonna take somebody older, an older guy, who's more mature because maybe you're just too intelligent or too talented or too intense." And so that was his way of being kind, but what was the message I got? If you want to get a man, you have to be less kind. You have to be less intense, less intelligent, and less talented….So there was this cognitive dissonance, as they say, about them giving me unconditional love and thinking I was wonderful and also being really uncomfortable with the fact that I wasn't doing the most important thing that would make me happy.

She saw the contradiction in her father's words: Mavis needed to change to get a man. Her natural qualities were not attractive. Despite lacking attraction to men, Mavis' lack of male suitors affected her self-worth, making her think she wasn't good enough. Even after realizing she was attracted to men, Mavis struggled to preserve her sense of femininity while unlearning heteronormative scripts. "It's something that I've had to undo. Without losing my sense of being a woman. I mean, there's challenges, right? A woman is someone who's heterosexual, a woman is someone who doesn't have wants. And so I've had to learn with a lot of therapy that I can say no to things, I can say I don't like this." Mavis shares similar gripes and problems heterosexual

informants also describe despite their different sexual orientations, warranting an analysis of gender that co-evaluates heterosexual and queer individuals.

Mavis only realized she was exclusively attracted to women in her mid-twenties, and her sexual initiation strongly differed from all other interlocutors. After college, Mavis assisted liberation efforts in a foreign country undergoing a revolution from a violent, authoritarian government. There, she developed a close friendship with an older, recently widowed woman. They eventually became lovers:

> I actually went to live with her family not knowing, neither of us knowing…. And then we started to just discover this and we didn't know what was going on. Some of the first physical things that happened were like when she was going off into the countryside and might not come back, and then gave me a kiss.

Mavis had never experienced any sexual or romantic relationships by this point. Neither woman knew they were sexually attracted to women either. As Mavis emphasized, the uncertain circumstances emboldened both women to act on their emotional affection when in peril. The urgency they experienced contributed to both women deviating from the compulsive heterosexual socialization. This experience differs from all women, who had some understanding of any emotional connection with a man escalating into a romantic relationship.

Daniela (57) identifies as queer and is the only other participant who did not identify as heterosexual. She has been married to two men and did not realize she was queer until the COVID-19 pandemic, in her early 50s. She shares:

> I stumbled upon a show that looked really interesting about these two Mexican-American sisters. Their mom had just died… and they realized that she had been a lesbian, and she never told them. And in this show, there was a lot of lesbian sex scenes, and I realized that I was really turned on by that, and I was really quite shocked. I was like, "What is happening here that I'm so into this?" I mean, I had noticed women before, like, "Oh, that woman's really beautiful," but I had never really felt that kind of attraction. And so I started talking to a couple of friends about it, and then I just started reading and just the more I read, I was like, "Oh my gosh, you know, like I think this is me."

Daniela realized she was attracted to women later in life through visual media and books. The heteronormative nature of society makes it difficult for individuals to question or deviate

from the assumed heterosexual dynamic, creating a culture of compulsory heterosexuality even for women who may be attracted to non-men (Rich 1980). This instance reinforces the scripted nature of life and how individuals unknowingly conform to society by automatically following the rules.

When growing up, the option to deviate from heterosexual attraction was not there. All Daniela knew had to do with a compulsory, unquestioned sexuality, but through exposure to alternate sexualities, she realized her attraction to women. The hegemony of heterosexual socialization precluded alternate options, but with more possibilities in later life, participants are able to have more options for sexuality. Their accounts most strongly illustrate how heteronormativity can be a cage, seeming so natural that people do not realize they have options. Daniela's experience in particular shows how increased representation of alternate sexualities opens the possibility for women discover

III Interpersonal level: agency and pleasure in sex, or lack thereof

Background conditions and gender socialization deeply shaped how participants engaged in sex, particularly in earlier sexual experiences. Women who were socialized into passivity struggled to assert their needs or communicate boundaries during sex, which often compromised both their agency and satisfaction. These dynamics consistently reproduced traditional heterosexual scripts that positioned men as initiators and women as gatekeepers, reinforcing broader gendered hierarchies in which women were expected to prioritize male pleasure over their own. As they aged, interlocutors described a growing capacity to assert their desires, set clearer boundaries, and critically reflect on past experiences. Over time, they not only learned to exert more sexual agency but also came to feel increasingly entitled to sexual pleasure, marking a significant shift in how they understood and enacted their sexuality.

Sexual coercion from male partners in earlier sexual experiences

Sexual coercion is defined as the "use of verbal or physical tactics to engage in sexual intercourse with a person who is unwilling (Jeffrey & Barata 2017: 911)." Many participants recalled encounters with pushy male partners, especially as teenagers and young adults. This included male partners that participants were in relationships with and men participants had just met who were only looking for casual sex.

Several participants described having penetrative sex for the first time because their boyfriend wanted to. Elizabeth (62) had sex for the first time after months of resisting her first serious boyfriend's attempts to have sex. She "fought it off" for months until he finally "slipped it in" while they were making out. Elizabeth shared several instances of boys when she was in high school trying to have sex, but always resisting. She recalls this encounter from the 10th grade, which occurred after her and a group of teenagers left a house party drunk:

> I had a pair of jeans that had two zippers in the front, like one zipper on one side and one on the other side. So we had this struggle where he would unzip one zipper, and I would zip it up, he goes to the other one again. It seems kind of funny now. Again, a guy desperately trying to have sex with me, me desperately trying *not* to have sex with him, except I wanted to kiss him, but I didn't want to, um, and then… somehow that was over, so we did not have sex.

Male partners would try to undress her while they kissed, slowly creeping to push their sexual encounter further to include penetrative sex from early adolescence through young adulthood. Until her mid-twenties, Elizabeth never wanted to do more than kissing male partners, and her way of preventing sex included covertly slowing down her partners, but they sometimes "got their way."

Daniela (57) describes a similar experience, where she enjoyed kissing but did not want to have sex. She talks about having sex because her boyfriend wanted to in high school. She did not characterize her boyfriend as pushy, but she described feeling like she had sex because her boyfriend wanted it, not because she did and acquiescing to his wants: " I didn't even really like

it, you know, it was more like, just did it to please the boyfriend." Daniela mentioned a lack of active consent when explaining sex in her early years. In her account, she does not mention her boyfriend specifically coercing or pressuring her, but she expresses the strong difficulty she faced in navigating this situation where she did not want to have sex. In the end, she had sex not because she wanted to, but to please her boyfriend. Both Daniela and Elizabeth remember enjoying kissing and touching, but not wanting to do more despite their male partner's intentions of having sex. Like Elizabeth, Daniela describes her sexual experiences with her boyfriend as kissing somehow evolving to sexual intercourse:

> And this was, you know, the old cars. I mean, I don't even remember if there were seat belts, but the seat was just like a long bank, you know, so you'd be laying down, messing around, and then before you knew it, you were having intercourse. So, I mean, I distinctly remember kind of thinking to myself, "I don't like this," but like it really didn't occur to me to stop it. Because I just think I wasn't socialized to, in my early years, to question anything.

These instances of "before you knew it, you were having intercourse" involve the male participant wanting to have sexual intercourse and the female participant who does not want to have sex resisting overtures but often losing out to the persistence of partners. This sexual dynamic has been recorded for decades, especially among youth and with the consistent gendered pattern of men pressuring women (Jeffrey & Barata 2017). Passive socialization for women and assertive socialization for men can function to create difficulties for women during sex, creating a window where male partners can benefit from the passivity women are socialized to show.

Participants experienced similar experiences of men using sexual coercion in casual encounters too. Rachel (51) recalls her first weekend in college where she had to tell a boy she was kissing she was a virgin to get him to back off:

> So, college freshman year, um, I got really drunk and was just making out with this guy in the middle of a fraternity. And then he took me back to my dorm and he was trying to get me to sleep with him, and I would not…Luckily he respected that. So, I'm also 5'10, I should mention, and like…being a tall, bigger

> woman, I think affects my experience differently from, you know, I've never felt like I rarely feel physically intimidated by men…. He did push pretty hard and finally I said, look, "I'm a virgin," and he was like, oh, and he backed off and it's like, you know, rape happens way too often in this world, not just this country, this world, you know, I mean, men take advantage of women all the time. So I was lucky that he did not force himself on me. I did have an experience where somebody forced himself.

The guy she met strategically "pushed pretty hard" to try to have sex with Rachel, constantly undermining her agency and only considering his will. All participants expressed awareness that sexual coercion was a likely and common part of heterosexual encounters–something they were expected to manage. Like Elizabeth's first boyfriend, one man managed to "slip it in there" while sharing a bed with Rachel. She told me:

> Yeah, so one time when I was traveling in Europe, I was sharing a like a hostel with a guy that we had met while we were traveling, and my friends went back to Toulouse where we were living without me because I wanted to stay one more day, and I was sharing a bed with this kid, and he managed to slip it in there like it was very impressive. I mean, jokingly impressive. I pushed... He stopped, he didn't- He stopped when I asked him to, so that was good.

These accounts present a clear dynamic of men pursuing women and slowly pressuring them to have sex until they acquiesce as a social pattern, using physical maneuvers and relentless pursuit to get what they want, completely ignoring the agency of participants. Past research has identified the prevalence of coercive tactics and techniques used by men to attain sex, both in the context of traditional heterosexual scripts and acquaintance rape (Warshaw 2019, Byers 1996).

Recalling these instances today produced complex reflections because women recognized that their experiences could be classified as date rape by today's standards, but they do not label their experiences sexual assault. Much cultural change, especially during #MeToo, occurred to address sexual expectations and proliferate more comprehensive discussions of consent and intentions (Gilmore 2023). Here, Daniela reflects on the harms of partners disregarding boundaries:

> Well, I think it can have really damaging consequences. It can obviously turn into like a rape or sexual assault. For me, I don't really define it as that because I just think that the culture was so different. Like for me, I just saw it as like I was just going along because that's kind of how I was socialized. I think now

> young people are much more active and seeking consent continuously throughout the whole sexual encounter, and I just hear little tidbits for my kid and his friends.

She explains how cultural expectations shaped her understanding of consent and sexual behavior. Although she felt uncomfortable during these experiences, Daniela does not consider them assault, instead framing them as normative for her time, a view that many participants shared. Michelle expands on the dissonance women describe when interpreting experiences which today could be called assault:

> I don't remember, but we were partying with a group of people and I ended up messing around with this guy, and we were all hammered, right? So we were fooling around. He wanted to have sex. I didn't, and I was like, "No," but I was drunk, and then I was like, the next thing I know, like we're having sex, right? And I was like, "OK, well, I guess. I guess this is what we're doing, huh?" And now I think because of like all of the information about date rape and everything, it might have gone differently, but back then I was kind of like, well, I was hammered. I shouldn't have even, like, if I didn't, I wasn't in control of myself, so I shouldn't have brought it to that point. And my attitude was like, you know, where now…I actually did tell my [daughters] that. They were like, "Mom, you got date raped," and I was like, "Yeah, technically as of now, but I'm not upset about it." Like there's no trauma to me because I didn't really care that much. I was like, "Oh, he was cute enough, whatever." I didn't really want, I didn't want to have sex with him, but I wasn't, there was no trauma for me.

Michelle speculates that if she knew what acquaintance rape was, she may have interpreted this experience differently in the moment. But at the time, she just went with it, taking a passive approach like many others. This response reveals how exactly behavior can be normalized and excused: while women resisted, there is rarely direct confrontation with persistent partners. There are few moments where informants explicitly condemn coercive pressure, and otherwise, male partners strategically weaponize lack of "strong" opposition as consent. The only two exceptions to this are Rachel's accounts, where she does explicitly verbally shut down the behavior of a partner and physically push another off. She shows how much more effective assertiveness is, revealing how passivity significantly disadvantages women and reinforces power imbalances.

Women grew up with “pushy boys wanting sex” as a normalized part of the sexual script–something they did not enjoy, but often accepted as part of their sexual reality. Today, they reflect on how male partners disregarded their agency and how many of their sexual experiences were not actively chosen, but rather unfolded due to persistent pressure and social conditioning. Male partners often pursued sex regardless of women’s level of participation, reflecting a time when consent was presumed unless explicitly denied. While these behaviors were once common and even expected, participants now recognize their problematic nature and describe fewer such encounters in later life. Their reflections reveal a process of reinterpreting these experiences through contemporary frameworks that foreground agency, consent, and mutual desire.

Lack of reciprocity from male partners

Distinct from coercion, some participants did not experience reciprocity from male partners when they did want sex, especially when younger. Women describe sexual encounters where men only pursued their own pleasure and showed indifference to their pleasure. Although persistent male partners often held little regard to women’s satisfaction, this distinctly focuses on lack of reciprocity from partners when all participants were fully participating and consenting to the sex.

Several participants recall their first sexual experiences revolving around the pleasure of the male partner, with little consideration for their own pleasure. This dynamic can be perpetuated and upheld by both parties. For example, Patty (71) was a completely willful participant in her earlier sexual experiences, but she remembers her early instances of sex were all about her boyfriend:

> They were largely done to please the boys that I was with. I also saw it as a rite of passage for myself. I think I had just turned 16. So this was 1969. And then after that I felt like a big girl, that I was gonna be a big girl after that. But the experience itself was largely mechanical. You know, it was, “You do this and I do this, and then you do that, and then I do.” It was not like, “Oh, this feels so good.” Maybe it did for a while up to that point, but then after that it was, you know, not so much. You know, I have to tell you it was

> probably at least 18 months after I started having sex that I ever experienced an orgasm. It was always for the benefit of my partner, but certainly not for me.

Patty expected the lack of reciprocity, accepting that sex was supposed to be about her pleasuring the boys she was with. Men can easily have penetrative sex and ejaculate without regard for their partner's satisfaction because sex in the past has been taught as exactly that: for the purpose of the male's pleasure. The idealization of vaginal-penile sex strategically safeguards the pleasure of men and ignores the female experience.

When engaging in penetrative vaginal-penile sex, men experience direct stimulation to their glands, the most sensitive and sexually arousing part of the body. The female equivalent is the clitoris, which due to distance between the vaginal canal and the clitoris, does not receive direct stimulation during penile-vaginal sex for most women (Nagoski 2015). The male preference for this type of sex and traditional understanding of sex as penetrative intercourse leads to large neglect of female pleasure if partners are not intentionally paying attention to their needs instead of just penetration. As covered earlier, many participants understood sex as heterosexual vaginal sex, which oftentimes facilitated dynamics where only the male partner was satisfied and the women's needs were neglected.

Penelope (62) separated from her husband of nearly 20 years due to persistent issues in their relationship. They had no sexual relations during the final eight years of their marriage. However, Penelope describes their sex life as mutually desired and emotionally fulfilling in the early years: "Passion was present," she recalls, and their sexual relationship was "definitely wanted by both of us, and pretty frequent… I think healthy and successful and mutual." But over time, the dynamic changed. As they took on the responsibilities of raising children and her husband became verbally abusive, intimacy eroded. They eventually stopped sharing a bedroom

altogether. Reflecting on the sexual part of their relationship, Penelope noted that it had always been "quick and easy," but also revealed something more profound:

> I'm sure you're gonna ask me this, but I will tell you that I have never, even in the beginning days, had an orgasm with [my ex-husband].. I think that's pretty important. So even though it's enjoyable and, you know, I did kind of get stimulated and stuff, that magical feeling of, you know, your body vibrates, or you feel like, "Oh my gosh, this is it," was not. Uh, driven by [him]. So, of course, I've never told that, but that's a bummer.

Penelope's account reveals the emotional and physical toll of an imbalanced sexual relationship. While she describes their sex as enjoyable in a basic sense, she also expresses deep disappointment in her partner's consistent inattention to her pleasure. The absence of orgasm is not just about physical satisfaction. It is a marker of a broader lack of recognition, care, and reciprocity. Over time, that unspoken void compounded, contributing to the emotional distancing that ultimately ended their marriage. Her story underscores how sex can be consensual and even pleasant, yet still unequal. When male pleasure is prioritized as the standard or endpoint of sex, women's needs are often sidelined. The unequal distribution of attention to pleasure doesn't always manifest as overt harm, but it does erode intimacy, especially when left unaddressed. Penelope's experience reflects a larger pattern shared by many participants–one where the absence of mutual care and responsiveness in sex left women feeling unseen, unsatisfied, and emotionally disconnected.

Learning sex could be good from egalitarian experiences

Many participants identify pivotal moments when they realized that sex could be enjoyable, which often contrasted sharply with earlier experiences of discomfort, disinterest, or neglect. Regardless of whether the context was a romantic relationship or a casual encounter, most participants remembered their first sexual experiences as awkward, uncomfortable, and largely unpleasurable. Sex typically became better over time once two conditions were met: they genuinely wanted to have sex, and their partners were attentive to their pleasure.

Etta (77) recalls her first sexual experiences with her serious boyfriend, who became her husband:

> I don't recall really liking it that much, and partly because I don't think, who eventually became my husband, I wasn't his first girlfriend, but I think I was close to his first formal sexual relationship because it was real clear he wasn't sure what he was doing either. So, it was experimental, it was, "Let's try this, let's, you know," but when you're still falling love with somebody, you're willing to go through all of that. And so that's pretty much what we did. It was, so we figured it out and then it was good, but it wasn't something I would if I hadn't loved them, there's no way I would have gone back the second time to try it cause it was like, you know.

Etta's testimony suggests that women who initiate their sexual trajectory with serious partners may have protection from unequal sexual dynamics. For her, love and emotional intimacy created a context in which experimentation was safe and mutually rewarding. Her account highlights that early sexual discomfort can be a natural part of mutual discovery, distinct from the kind of discomfort that arises when partners are inattentive, coercive, or indifferent to a woman's needs.

By contrast, participants whose early experiences remained one-sided often described later experiencing "turning points" when they realized that sex could, in fact, be pleasurable. These realizations frequently came from encounters with partners who made them feel seen, cared for, and involved. Whereas previously all sexual experiences had not been pleasurable or satisfactory, these new experiences showed participants that sex could be enjoyable, affecting their trajectories by adding a new type of experience (Carpenter 2010). Elizabeth (62) recalls her turning point:

> In grad school, I…had sex with [a man], who actually made me feel like, "Oh, sex can be for me too." Those other guys, like it was all about them and maybe a little bit about me, but I was like, "Oh, that was actually really good." I had to wait till I was like 24 to find that… I guess because he wasn't just like, you know…trying to get at me. He had a much better understanding of, and I didn't necessarily know either, like he had a much better understanding of what I might need.

Elizabeth identifies two factors that distinguished this from her previous sexual experiences: her partner was not "just getting at her" and was attentive to her needs, needs which she did not

know she had either. This was the first encounter where Elizabeth fully wanted to have sex as opposed to being pursued by assertive and aggressive partners until they "slipped it in." As opposed to prior experiences, Elizabeth was fully consenting and participating rather than enduring the efforts of male partners to escalate from kissing and sexual touching to penetrative sex.

As the only participant who identifies as queer, Daniela experienced a similar revelation the first time she had sex with a woman as she had after her first satisfying sexual experience with a man. She describes the experience as more pleasurable and sensual rather than centering around ejaculation. She shares:

> I was pretty terrified, not knowing what to expect, becoming intimate with a woman, but it was absolutely fabulous. Like it was just so different from my experience with the men that I had been intimate with. It was just much more sensual. And there was no rushing. Yeah, I think my experiences with men were like you'd have intercourse, they would ejaculate and then it's over. And I'm sure there are men that are not like that, but that was my experience and it can leave you very unsatisfied. But with my ex-partner, it wasn't just about genitalia, you know, it's about stroking your arm or stroking your hair or massaging. You know, In the context of intimacy. So it was much more satisfying for me.

She points out the ubiquity of sex revolving around ejaculation and orgasm in heterosexual dynamics. Sexuality studies and psychology has pushed toward reframing sex with more loose definitions: encouraging focus on pleasure all over the body rather than chasing orgasm. Sex therapists promote this as a more representative understanding of what sex can be and encourage modifying harmful cultural scripts (Nagoski 2015).

Overall, participants described relationships or dynamics where their lover paid more attention to them as the most pleasurable, describing egalitarian dynamics where both partners were invested in each other's pleasure. For enjoyable sex, Anne (72) says the requisite is respect. "Well, you gotta show each other respect. Period," she says. Ruth describes how she and her husband learned from each other how to best satisfy each other:

> I think we learned from each other. And I think that's, and, and we still do, you know, as we have aged, things have changed, and, and so we, we still continue to learn and sex is a part of that, you know, and, and, you know, knowing what is it, it's important to both of us that sex be satisfying. For both of us, um, and it's not about he needs sex or I need sex, it's about What is going to satisfy both of us? So, you know, and, and as I said, we, we learned, you know, we, we, we found ways to make each other both comfortable, happy, feeling good, and sex was one of those ways. It wasn't the only way.

These reflections highlight a critical insight: enjoyable sex is not just about technique or chemistry but about the presence of egalitarian dynamics, emotional safety, and mutual attentiveness. When those elements are present, sex becomes not just an act, but a meaningful form of connection.

Aging undoing harmful gendered scripts

Informants experienced critical turning points in their relationships to sexuality, pleasure, and gendered expectations as they aged by gaining a sense of personal growth and clarity. With time and experience, many came to reject the internalized beliefs that once constrained their sexual agency and sense of self-worth. This process of unlearning harmful scripts often coincided with increased confidence, greater self-assurance, and a renewed capacity for pleasure. As recent research suggests, aging can provide an opportunity for some women to shed dominant gendered sexual scripts and to reconstruct sexuality on their own terms (Bastian, Miller & Carpenter 2025).

Patty (71) experienced a significant turning point in her late 30s, explaining she “reached a level of maturity where [she] felt liberated to fully enjoy the experience…like [she] had to give [herself] permission to be fully present in that experience.”

> I was always second guessing myself. Did I say the right thing? Did I do the right thing? Did I wear the right dress? Did I put on the right lipstick? It was one of those weird superficial evaluations of me constantly that made me think that I wasn't, well, maybe that I wasn't good enough. I think we all walk around with little questions like that over our heads, like, “Oh, am I a good person, or do people like me or whatever,” but I do think that there is in the female-male dynamic, as we have been taught, not only does the female feel [hesitation] lesser, really it's just lesser… And that dominates…Then, finally, when we get to 40 and you go, “Well, wait a minute. If somebody's not making me happy, then it's up to me to make me happy.” And then all of a sudden you start making those decisions…It took me until my 40s to figure that

> out. Up until then, I was always trying to figure out how to make myself more attractive to men, and to be the partner that they wanted me to be. And then I said that I can't do that. Although I still do it.

Patty describes a shift in her 40s, when she finally recognized her own power and right to happiness. She began to center her own needs, even if remnants of that old conditioning lingered. Her narrative illustrates how aging can help women confront and revise the gendered socializations that form a strong basis of both sexuality and self-image.

Penelope (62) also experienced a significant reawakening in later life. She had spent nearly a decade in a marriage devoid of intimacy. Reflecting on that period, she recalls the pain and distress this caused, saying, “These are important things, so, you know, not being intimate with somebody for basically a long time doesn’t feel great?” She recalled how a small encounter with a man at a wedding last year spawned a big realization:

> I don't remember what I was wearing, but I looked really cute and I looked very feminine and very attractive. And I remember, my husband wasn't there. I was with my sister, her husband, and some people I knew, but not very closely. And a gentleman was looking at me and I felt good. I felt like this is nice and this is feminine, and this is sensual or just like a part of my emotion that I still have, and I can still partake, or I can still share with someone. So, um, yeah. So I just remember that it was just really a good feeling to have that feminine, that, that inner, special sensuality. That is amazing and it's part of being human. So it's still there.

Penelope had come to accept the absence of sex in her marriage as permanent, but this moment reminded her that she remained a sexual being, worthy of desire and capable of pleasure. Her experience highlights how aging, rather than diminishing sexuality, can open space for self-reclamation. Together, these narratives illustrate how aging can function as a site of resistance against entrenched gendered sexual scripts. Their stories challenge narrow cultural assumptions about sexuality in later life and support the growing body of research showing that older adults, particularly women, are capable of–and often actively engaged in–redefining their sexual lives in more egalitarian and fulfilling ways (Bastian, Miller & Carpenter 2025).

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how progressive cisgender women aged 51-77 navigated their sexual lives under the enduring influence of gendered expectations, and how they came to exert sexual agency and pursue pleasure in increasingly conscious and intentional ways. Drawing from in-depth, personal accounts, the findings illuminate the evolving nature of sexual conduct across the life course and the enduring grip of heteropatriarchal norms, even on those who ideologically reject them.

While participants often internalized traditional gender roles in their youth, they also reflected on how they gradually came to question, resist, and ultimately reshape those unequal sexual expectations. These changes were catalyzed by broader structural shifts, such as the advent of birth control, feminist movements, increased public discourse around sex, and a growing cultural emphasis on consent. At the same time, change was also deeply personal: participants matured, gained confidence, left unsatisfying relationships, and formed new understandings of themselves as sexual subjects deserving of mutual pleasure and respect.

Participants' trajectories reveal how gender functions across multiple scales–structural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic–to shape sexual behavior. Their narratives complicate any linear or universal idea of sexual liberation. Many described long periods of unsatisfying or inequitable sex, only to later discover that sex could be mutually gratifying, an insight often sparked by egalitarian partners or queer sexual experiences. These realizations were not simply about better technique or compatibility. They reflect a reorientation away from traditional sexual scripts and toward a more expansive, self-affirming understanding of sex.

The experiences of these women suggest that progressive ideology alone is not sufficient to undo gendered sexual norms. Despite their political beliefs, many participants spent years

participating in sexual dynamics shaped by male pleasure and dominance. Yet, their stories also show how ideology, when coupled with reflection, personal growth, and the new sexual experiences, can serve as a tool for unlearning and rewriting scripts.

Ultimately, this study highlights that sexual liberation is not a singular event but an ongoing process that unfolds unevenly across time, shaped by individual, relational, and cultural change. It affirms the importance of listening to women's stories in all their complexity and contradiction, and reminds us that sex, as Millett wrote, is never just sex. It is a mirror of society's values, a battleground for power, and, as these women have shown, a site of transformation.

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