

# Male and Female Sexual Dysfunction in a Rapidly Changing Cultural Environment: Addressing Gender Equality versus Equivalence in the Bedroom



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The socio-sexual climate in Western cultures is changing at an astounding rate. Never before have societal expectations about gender roles shifted so radically, transforming our understanding of what it means to be a sexual man or woman today. We have observed that confusion regarding masculine and feminine roles within long-term committed relationships can represent challenges for the treatment of sexual dysfunction. Despite the relevance to sexual medicine, sexual medicine specialists have largely avoided this controversial topic.

**Aim:** To review the current literature relating to heterosexual gender roles and sexual intimacy, to offer perspective and context on this issue, and to propose an approach to the man, woman, or couple based in evolutionary theory that we have found useful in our extensive clinical experiences.

**Methods:** We reviewed the English-language peer-reviewed literature, primarily from 2000 through 2015, that addressed the impact of heterosexual gender role expression on sexual intimacy in long-term committed relationships.

**Main Outcome Measures:** Main outcomes include a review of the applicable literature and an assessment of the literature's relevance for patients and practitioners of sexual medicine. An alternative context for understanding heterosexual gender expression grounded in evolutionary theory is provided, as is a new treatment perspective based on our work as a sex therapist and an urologist.

**Results:** The impact of gender expression on sexual experience might be impossible to ascertain fully because it is difficult to quantify in research, independently and especially in combination. Furthermore, existing research is fraught with challenges and inadequacies.

**Conclusion:** Although we acknowledge and affirm the critical importance of gender equality, modern conceptualizations of gender in the literature ignore pertinent evolutionary adaptations and might be minimally applicable to sexual medicine patients. More research is needed. We propose that equality of genders does not necessarily mean similarity of genders, at least in sexual medicine.

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**Key Words:** Gender Roles; Male Sexual Dysfunction; Female Sexual Dysfunction; Sex Therapy; Masculinity; Femininity

## INTRODUCTION

We have arrived at a unique moment in the history of sexual medicine. The socio-sexual climate in Western culture is changing at an astounding rate. Gains in employment opportunities, earning power, and prestige allow women an unpredicted flexibility

regarding sexual and committed relationships. Never before have sexual imagery and opportunity been so easily and readily available. The Internet has enabled a vast array of pornography to be extraordinarily accessible, offering unprecedented levels of sexual stimulation and immediate sexual gratification.<sup>1</sup> Smartphone applications enable men and women to locate sex partners quickly and discretely, without requiring the exchange of personal data as basic as a first name. Web sites confidentially facilitate sexual connections between people in committed relationships who are seeking affairs with little or no emotional attachment. Perhaps most importantly, never before have societal expectations about gender roles shifted so radically,<sup>2,3</sup> transforming our understanding of what it means to be a sexual man or woman today.

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Although gender role expression has garnered a dramatic increase in media attention and public interest,<sup>4–7</sup> sexual medicine specialists have largely avoided this controversial topic. This lack of professional attention is noteworthy, because gender role expression has potential implications for all aspects of people's lives, including intimate relationships,<sup>8–10</sup> self-esteem,<sup>11</sup> emotional expression,<sup>12</sup> and lifestyle choices.<sup>13–15</sup>

The impact of these very potent changes in our understanding of masculinity and femininity on sexual experience might be impossible to ascertain fully, because they are difficult to quantify in research,<sup>16,17</sup> independently and especially in combination. Furthermore, existing research is fraught with challenges and inaccuracies.<sup>18–20</sup> Most importantly, research on healthy, liberal college-age volunteers in relatively short-term romantic relationships might not be generalizable to heterosexual adults in decades-old monogamous relationships seeking treatment for sexual concerns and dysfunctions.<sup>21</sup> This research is further limited by the fact that no research comes from the field of sexual medicine. With the exception of the impact of medical illnesses (such as prostate or breast cancer) on gender identity and intimacy, this research has been conducted by academicians with a perspective that appears to de-emphasize gender differences. As sexual medicine practitioners, we view this perspective as problematic because many of our patients experience satisfying dyadic sexuality as dependent, at least to some degree, on gender distinctions.

We believe recent social shifts regarding male and female sexuality contribute to personal and relationship distress for many individuals and couples in long-term relationships. In our respective clinical practices as a sex therapist and as a urologist specializing in male sexual dysfunction, this theme is evident: confusion regarding gender role expression as it affects dyadic sexual behavior. Examples of such challenges include a stay-at-home father developing erectile dysfunction as a result of feeling subservient to his successful professional wife, or a woman who longs for a sexually dominant lover yet resists this dynamic because she believes it to be “antifeminist.”

Our aim in this article is to review the current literature relating to heterosexual gender roles and sexual intimacy, to offer some perspective and context on this issue, and to propose an approach to the man, woman, or couple that we have found useful in our own extensive clinical experiences. This approach integrates human biology, psychology, and current social standards while honoring each individual's uniqueness. Although this article is focused primarily on heterosexuals, these concepts also could resonate for some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Shifting Gender Role Identity and Sexual Expression

Good sex is a vital aspect of intimacy. Men and women consistently endorse a satisfying sex life as critical to relationship

and life satisfaction.<sup>22–24</sup> Surveys suggest that sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and life satisfaction are indeed correlated.<sup>25,26</sup> When partners feel less sexually connected, intimacy can suffer.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, when men and women are successfully treated for their sexual concerns, improved emotional intimacy can result. Thus, as sexual medicine practitioners, we have the opportunity not only to improve our patients' sex lives but also to improve their self-esteem and their intimate relationships more generally.

Current research on heterosexual gender expression promotes gender equality by empowering women and redefining masculinity<sup>28</sup> based on the viewpoint that traditional gender role expression results in negative outcomes for men and women, and that couples benefit when men and women express less traditional sexual styles.<sup>29–32</sup> We do not disagree. However, the literature is fraught with challenges. For example, the authors of one relevant literature review<sup>28</sup> acknowledge “most of the evidence has come from American college students, which severely limits the generalizability of the findings. Further, much of the data stem from self-reports, which can be problematic when investigating sensitive topics such as sex.”<sup>33</sup> We agree and suggest that it is essential to note that the sexual and gender expression of college-age subjects is influenced by the fact that they are at a specific, unique point in the lifecycle. It is our experience that gender role expression tends to create complexities and challenges for more mature couples, because relationship and sexual dynamics are apt to change as a relationship ages.

Another problem in the literature relates to assumptions made about masculinity, which is generally defined by these researchers in a stereotypically traditional and negative way. That is, it is considered synonymous with the disrespect of women (ie, men who exhibit “violence, power over women, sexism” etc). Of course, most contemporary women would respond negatively to this type of man. However, we understand modern masculinity to be more nuanced and respectful of women<sup>34</sup> and suggest that women respond emotionally and sexually in a positive way to a more evolved version of masculinity that encompasses respect for women and respect for mature masculine ideals such as assertiveness and self-confidence. Thus, when a female college student verbalizes a preference for a non-traditional man, it is not necessarily a “softer” or more vulnerable man that she is attracted to, but rather a strong man who also respects women. The current literature does not make this critical distinction.

Furthermore, there is limited research on gender expression conducted in heterosexual adults. Several researchers have attempted to obtain a more generalizable sample by conducting an online survey, and we applaud their efforts. However, significant challenges remain. For example, one online survey of adults concluded that feminism positively affects romantic relationships.<sup>31</sup> We find this conclusion of little clinical utility for several reasons. This non-college sample consisted overwhelmingly of women (289 women and 81 men) with an average age of 26 years and 4 years in their relationship. Relationship

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