

Does Gender Equality Impact Sexual Desire?

With more households having dual incomes, a more balanced division of housework and child care, why do couples seem to less happy in the bedroom instead of more happy? In the past three or four years, research studies have begun to explore how relationship dynamics, like gender equality, can affect sexual desire.

The New York Times article “Does a More Equal Marriage Mean Less Sex?” written by Lori Gottlieb (2014) garnered quite a bit of attention. She reports a variety of outcomes from various research studies, in addition to discussions with the field’s leading couples therapists. When Gottlieb asked Esther Perel, a couples therapist whose book, “Mating in Captivity,” addresses the issue of desire in marriage, about the role sexual scripts play in egalitarian partnerships, she explained it like this:

“Egalitarian marriage takes the values of a good social system — consensus-building and consent — and assumes you can bring these rules into the bedroom. But the values that make for good social relationships are not necessarily the same ones that drive lust.” In fact, she continued, “most of us get turned on at night by the very things that we’ll demonstrate against during the day.”

If we take sexual satisfaction out of the equation, couples in egalitarian relationships tend to report being happier than couples with “traditional gender roles,” where the male works outside of the house and the female works inside the house and is the primary caregiver of their children. As reported by McCarthy (2014) most couples who have emphasized an egalitarian bond report “greater marital satisfaction and security.” He adds that, unfortunately, egalitarian marriages also tend to have less sex (e.g. ten times or less per year); which results in an intimate/best friend marriage, but not a sexual marriage. This lack of sex in marriages may be part of the reason we’ve seen an increase in infidelity. Research studies over the past decade have found infidelity statistics on the rise, ranging from 15-20% among married couples.

Biological anthropologist Helen Fisher conducted a study on extramarital affairs with the hope of discovering why people have affairs. She found that 56% of her male participants and 34% of her female participants said that they were either “happy” or “very happy” in their relationships. Thus, despite feeling happy (or very happy) in their relationships, they still chose to engage in extramarital affairs. This further illustrates that one’s relationship happiness doesn’t necessarily include feelings of sexual desire and fulfillment.

The dilemma becomes one in which some partners in egalitarian relationships feel discomfort engaging in sexual scenarios with their partner that might include some form of power play, despite the fact that those encounters would be much more pleasurable for them. For example, a man who does not feel comfortable objectifying or having “erotic” sex, with a wife that he sees as his equal. In such cases, he might look outside of the marriage to pornography or an extramarital affair to fulfill those sexual desires.

If partner equality ultimately makes us feel happier in the relationship, but less fulfilled sexually, this begs the question, “How do we have relationships where we are equals outside of the bedroom, but not inside of the bedroom?” As noted by McCarthy, (2014) the answer is that most couples need to have awareness that their **relational style** is different than their **sexual style**. For example, couples can play with power exchange (i.e. dominance and submission) in the bedroom, and still be equals outside of the bedroom. It’s

important that couples learn how to communicate their sexual thoughts and feelings and share their sexual desires openly and honestly with each other. Creating space in the relationship for each to have their own sexual style allows for not only a secure, happy marriage; but a sexually fulfilling one as well.

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