

# SEXUALITY IN HISTORY – 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## OVERVIEW

The central development in 20<sup>th</sup> century sexuality has been the steady decline of reproductive sex and the rise in the acceptability of and interest in recreational sex. The trend has been most pronounced in places like the West and Japan, but has some global applicability particularly after World War II, perhaps particularly in Latin America. Other developments add to or complicate the picture.

**Birth control.** Birth control devices steadily gained ground, fueling the equally steady decline of the birth rate with less need for periods of abstinence. Abortion rates were significant as well, but they tended to drop in the affluent countries. Some religious groups opposed the birth control trend, seeking to maintain the link between sex and reproduction, but even many faithful increasingly ignored their pressure. Introduction of the pill, in 1960, and then other technical improvements added to the momentum.

**Disease.** New treatments also became available for the most common sexually transmitted diseases. The rise of AIDS in the 1980s complicated the picture, but it too was ultimately brought under control, even in the parts of Africa that were hardest hit.

**Public culture.** Sexuality was an important part of consumer culture. Japan resumed its production of erotic materials. Sexual scenes increasingly entered into films and television, particularly from the 1960s onward. New sexual advice literature urged the importance and availability of pleasure, and reversed the old Victorian claim that women had no sex drive. Outright pornography expanded as well, becoming unprecedentedly available with the rise of the Internet.

**Behavior.** Studies showed a widespread increase in the importance of sex within marriage. Even more striking was a widespread drop in the age of first sex – part of the sexual revolution of the 1960s – particularly for young women. Premarital sex became increasingly common and, in the affluent societies, expectations of chastity at marriage increasingly disappeared. Even people in older age gained a new emphasis on sexual connections, a striking change particularly for postmenopausal women.

**Homosexuality.** Homosexual behavior was increasingly criticized in the West during the first half of the century, as many psychiatrists claimed it was a mental disorder. But growing assertiveness by gay groups, plus the wider commitment to sexual pleasure, rather rapidly cut into repression, as Western opinion shifted toward acceptance – even of gay marriage. And from 1989 onward gay couples were increasingly allowed to wed, and homosexuality also entered into acceptable media presentations.

**Opposition.** These various trends provoked considerable, and often passionate, opposition, particularly from conservative religious groups. The United States moved more slowly than Western Europe or Japan, for example in accepting nudity in the press or in beaches. But the overall trend persisted in many parts of the world.

**Communist societies.** Under Stalin, in the Soviet Union, and Mao Zedong in China, communist societies long held themselves in opposition to Western sexuality, seeing it as a major example of bourgeois decadence and a distraction from true socialist goals. Both governments sought to encourage reproductive sex, and claimed also to reduce prostitution; media representations were also chaste, particularly in China where even kissing was taboo. This interesting exception only eased in Russia with communist collapse, in China with the new population policy adopted in 1978. Russia in the 1990s quickly seemed to embrace a more permissive culture, and in China youth dating and other practices spread more widely.

**Global disputes and homosexuality.** The rise of a more permissive sexual environment provoked some interesting regional divisions. Many Islamic and some Hindu leaders decried Western sexual culture and sought to limit its impact, including insistence (in Islam) on traditionally concealing costumes for women. In South Asia, rates of rape may have risen as part of male efforts to use sexual violence to repress change among women.

Fascinating divisions accompanied the growing Western push for gay rights. African and Muslim regions largely rejected open homosexual behavior (in some cases, despite earlier traditions), sometimes expanding police repression. Russia under Vladimir Putin claimed to be defending Christian culture against gays. Other regions were more mixed, with some changes developing in India and parts of East Asia.

**Sex trafficking.** Growing affluence and sexual interest in some parts of the world, poverty and dislocations in others, led to rising rates of sex trafficking and also sex tourism to places such as Thailand or Costa Rica.

**21<sup>st</sup> century.** Two developments around of the turn of the century suggested some modifications to leading 20<sup>th</sup> century trends. In the first place, women in several countries began to protest what they saw as abusive male sexual behavior, not only physical claims but also verbal innuendoes. The term sexual harassment was introduced as part of an effort to set new boundaries.

Several societies, including Japan, the US, and Britain, also reported declining rates of sexual activity, particularly among younger adults. In some cases access to pornography may have reduced more standard sexual interests, but other factors were debated as well. Clearly, change remained a vital part of the sexual history of the contemporary world.

## SEXUALITY IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IN MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETIES

**Recreational sex** The overriding development in the history of sexuality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the triumph of recreational sex as legitimate and desirable, and the corresponding reduction in the emphasis on reproductive sex. This shift showed up, to some extent, almost everywhere in the world, but it was particularly pronounced in the advanced industrial/ high consumer societies, and therefore particularly in the West and Japan/Pacific Rim. The sexual “new regime” advanced particularly rapidly after World War II.

Obviously, recreational sex has been part of the human experience for a long time, but it had never before gained the centrality, and respectability, it has attained during the past century. Changes in sexuality earlier in the industrial revolution, including the “sexual revolutions” in places like the West and Russia, had prepared the shift. But this does not detract from the larger claim: it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the quest for sexual pleasure increasingly embraced “respectable” as well as lower-class behaviors, and female as well as male. And all this constituted a major change in human behaviors and expectations.

Of course there have been complexities, including loud moral complaints and countermoves (interestingly, particularly important in the United States). Predictable generational disputes emerged, especially in the 1960s. And new behaviors brought some new problems. These developments must be folded into 20<sup>th</sup>-century sexual history.

A number of changes contributed to the new pattern, but it ultimately the combination that mattered.

**Birth control.** Access to birth control devices improved fairly steadily during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and willingness to use them expanded as well in the advanced industrial zone. Desired family size steadily diminished, as birth rates, though fluctuating, tended toward 2-3 children per family. These two developments, taken together, dramatically shifted the balance from reproductive to recreational sex.

By the 1940s married couples throughout the West were increasingly accustomed to using birth control devices to help regulate pregnancies. Conversions were particularly striking, if complicated, among groups such as Catholics, for the Church continued officially to oppose the use of artificial means. In Japan, similar trends emerged by the 1950s, as the government began to encourage population control.

Many Western countries also eased access to abortion by the 1960s, amid great debate. While actual abortion rates declined, given other birth control options, the changes contributed to the drop in unwanted reproduction.

**The pill.** Further steps occurred after 1960, with the introduction of the pill and other means such as intra-uterine devices. By this point most adolescents as well as adults in the advanced industrial societies could and did engage in sex independent of reproduction. Unintended pregnancies still occurred, and abortion remained an important option in many cases; but even abortion rates ultimately declined in these regions in favor of the other methods. Religious objections also complicated the picture, particularly in the United States: huge debates raged over abortion but also adolescent access to birth control. A vocal minority continued to believe that birth control could lead to undesirable levels of recreational sex. Debates over particular devices also complicated Japanese response; use of the pill, for example, was approved only in 1999. But the overall trends were clear.

**Baby boom.** The decline of reproductive sex was interestingly interrupted, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, by renewed interest in childbearing, partly to compensate for the demographic impact of Depression constraints. A number of families now had 3-4 children, often rather closely spaced. The surge was particularly strong in the United States. But while briefly important, the boom soon yielded to renewed birth rate decline, which continued fairly steadily in these regions into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Sexually transmitted diseases.** Recreational sex was also facilitated by the strides made against some of the classic venereal diseases. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, antibacterial drugs effectively and fairly inexpensively treated syphilis and gonorrhea, as these complications declined in importance. Here, the rise of new problems, such as genital herpes and AIDs, introduced important challenges in the 1980s, but these did not alter the basic trends, and ultimately additional medical measures lessened the threat in the wealthy countries.

**Public culture.** Access to erotic materials was hardly a modern invention (particularly in countries like Japan), but there is no question that, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, sexually explicit themes became increasingly widespread. Movies and television, long carefully regulated, began to introduce more open sexuality, and official codes were adjusted in the process. "Bedroom scenes", once barred, now became commonplace, even on television, along with partial or complete nudity. The real-life sexual antics of movie stars added to the new culture, while other popular practices – like the parade of bikini-clad contestants in beauty contests – contributed as well. It was noteworthy that exposure of female bodies was far more extensive than that of males, where sexual organs were still commonly concealed.

Magazine publications increasingly featured nude poses, and major publication empires developed around *Playboy* and its rivals; for several decades the "nude centerfold" became a staple for many male readers. Some explicit magazines were also targeted specifically at teenagers, like *Bravo* in Germany. Shading off from this, outright pornography became more widely available, by the 1990s including materials featured on the Internet.

These trends generated some backlash, particularly among religious conservatives. Limitations were particularly interesting in the United States where, compared to Europe, nude scenes were curtailed in venues like newspapers and billboards. On the other hand, erotic images – including displays of pubic hair – gained ground steadily in Japan.

**Sexual advice.** Public culture was also altered with a new generation of expertise, willing to discuss sexual issues openly and eager to promote greater pleasure – often with specific commitment to altering

traditional notions of female reticence. Experts like Masters and Johnson, in the United States, urged the importance and validity of pleasure, and discussed methods – from foreplay to oral sex – that could provide it – for both genders. Books with titles like *The Joy of Sex* won wide popularity. Authorities in the United States did worry about the impact of this kind of advice on teenagers, and for the most part sexual education classes offered in American schools continued to emphasize the importance of abstinence – “Just Say No” was a major theme in the 1980s and beyond – but the overall trend was clear.

**Behaviors.** Measurable changes in behavior were, of course, the most important component in the new sexuality. Some developments were hard to chart: it is very likely that rates of masturbation increased in the more sexualized atmosphere, and older Western biases against masturbation eased, but precision is impossible.

Sexual activity among teenagers measurably increased. The famous “sexual revolution” of the 1960s centered most obviously on a decline in the age of first sex, particularly for women. In the United States, 29% of women reported a first sexual experience between the ages of 15-19; by 1988 the figure had risen to 52%. Similar patterns emerged in Europe and Japan; while younger teens in Japan were unlikely to have sex, older teens openly expressed embarrassment if they remained virgin. At the same time, the age of marriage was rising steadily, as more people sought to complete their education and establish an economic foothold. So, obviously, the linkage between sex and marriage for young adults was loosening steadily. Correspondingly, older expectations about female virginity declined rapidly, as did acceptable sexual jealousy.

**Adults.** Sexual activity within marriage undoubtedly increased as well, and while adultery could still cause great turmoil, public dismay declined. During the 1960s an “open marriage” movement emerged advocating regular access to multiple partners, and while the public fad did not last, various couples continued to make their own arrangements. Sexual methods probably shifted as well, particularly with the growing popularity of oral sex.

Sexual expectations among older people changed, in response to the growing interest in pleasure; menopause was no longer seen as a barrier. By the late 1990s the introduction of drugs like Viagra to maintain potency both reflected and encouraged sexual activity among older adults (though attention focused disproportionately on men).

**Debate.** Quite apart from the ongoing concerns of conservatives, and some interesting regional variations within the advanced industrial zone, new sexual patterns raised some important issues. Most basically, a potential gap existed between the expectations fanned by public culture, and the actual sexual experience of many people. Women, particularly, often complained that the new attention to female sexuality and pleasure was not carrying through in practice.

**Homosexuality.** Western attitudes toward homosexuality actually toughened through the first two thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New scientific studies drew a sharp distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors – complicating the actual experience of bisexuality – and experts claimed that homosexuality actually was a form of psychological disease. Police attacks on gay clubs increased in severity, particularly during the early stages of the Cold War when “deviance” sometimes seemed unpatriotic.

This began to change, however, in the final decades of the century, throughout the West and Japan. . While growing commitment to human rights and resistance to police oppression most obviously fueled the new gay movements, the larger atmosphere of acceptance of sexual pleasure and nonreproductive sex played in as well.

Various court rulings in the West and Japan began to push back discrimination. Psychologists removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders (the World Health Organization followed suit in 1992). Openly gay behavior became more widespread – despite the flurry of concern over AIDs – and public opinion steadily shifted in favor of gay rights, even gay marriage. Here was another striking reversal of traditional sexual attitudes – particularly in the West – though bitter disagreements continued among conservative critics.

**Conclusion** The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw, quite simply, an impressively systematic reconsideration of both traditional sexual morality, and the patterns that had developed in the Victorian 19<sup>th</sup> century. The result was a significant change in the human experience in a number of world regions.

*Study questions:*

1. What caused the key changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors? Why did they develop most widely in advanced industrial societies?
2. Why and how did traditional sexual jealousy become less viable?
3. What were the differences in European and United States patterns?
4. Had there ever before been such a significant set of changes in human sexuality?

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*Japan in Transformation.* By J. Kingston (Longman, 2001).

*The Repeal of Reticeance: a history of America's cultural and legal struggles over free speech, obscenity, sexual liberation and modern art.* By Rachel Gurstein (Hill and Wang, 1996).

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## COMMUNIST SOCIETY : RUSSIA

Major communist societies offered a vivid contrast with patterns of sexuality in other parts of the world during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus on building a revolutionary and industrial system prompted many efforts to discipline sex for the higher good. The desire to offer an alternative to Western bourgeois decadence pointed in the same direction. And finally, the goal of expanding the population focused attention, at least in principle, on reproductive sex.

**Soviet Union in the 1920s.** During the early Soviet years, an atmosphere of experiment, building on some of the trends in late tsarist Russia, encouraged innovative thinking, for example about the necessity of marriage. Church weddings yielded to simpler civil ceremonies, and divorce was liberalized, with rates soaring. Abortion was also legalized, a first in European history. Homosexuality was entirely decriminalized in 1917, another tribute – Soviet leaders claimed -- to modern, scientific thinking. At the same time, prostitution and venereal disease continued to increase. Many articles discussed the sheer physical pleasure of sex.

**Repression.** This mood was short-lived, particularly as Stalin took over and emphasis on industrialization intensified. Officials issued cautionary statements, as in “sexual life is permissible only insofar as it encourages the growth of collective feelings, class organization” Individual satisfaction was now seen as counter-revolutionary, and campaigns against “sexual depravity” mounted. New laws banned pornography and prostitution (and official data quickly were adjusted to show that this scourge was disappearing under Soviet rule, and visits to prostitutes may well have become less common, and certain more surreptitious). Homosexuality was again outlawed, in 1936, held to be decadent and contrary to revolutionary goals. Divorce laws became more complex, along with defense of marital, reproductive sex. Experts touted sublimation in interests of social progress. The similarities to earlier Western Victorianism were striking.

**Behaviors.** The campaign surely had results, but it faltered at least in some respects. Abortion rates remained high, for amid crowded cities many individuals and families sought to avoid unwanted children and indulge in some recreational sex. And the goal of rapid population increase also remained elusive. But the restrictive tone persisted. During the Cold War Soviet morality was held up in contrast to Western permissiveness. In a striking scene, a Soviet leader visited Hollywood in 1959 and was truly shocked by scantily-clad Can-Can dancers on a movie set.

*Study questions:*

1. What caused the repressive Communist approach to sexuality? Were some of the causes similar to those that had engendered Victorianism?
2. Why was homosexuality targeted?
3. What were some of the most important impacts of the Communist approach?

*Further reading:*

“Sex in the Soviet Union: myths and mores.” By Anna Ayzvazyan. In *Russia Beyond* (Sept. 30, 2013).

COMMUNIST SOCIETY : CHINA

**Maoist China.** Much the same scenario took shape after the communist revolution in China, and particularly during the 1960s Cultural Revolution phase. Communism did unseat parentally-arranged marriages, in favor of choice by young people themselves. But officials frowned on sexual dalliance and at points even banned dating in many settings. Even more than in the Soviet Union, Chinese communists touted standardized, rather drab styles of dress, another sign of the hope to avoid provocative behavior; one woman recalled that no choice was available, because “fashionable clothes...were regarded as bourgeois”. Girls were encouraged to cut their hair short, to avoid any emphasis on femininity. Even more than with the Soviets, outside Western influence was fiercely opposed. Sex was seen as a potentially disruptive force in many ways.

**Public culture.** Approved drama and fiction shunned romantic relationships and even much depiction of marriage. Government censors deleted any movie scenes that smacked of sex or love. No sex education was provided, and the topic was simply taboo. As one man recalled, “We did not have any knowledge about sexuality. Our parents never talked about it. Every kid around me experienced a frightening and confusing puberty.” Pre-marital sex was shameful – though of course it did sometimes occur as young people experimented despite, or sometimes because of, their lack of knowledge.

**Homosexuality.** Homosexuality was rigorously proscribed, despite earlier Chinese traditions. It was taken to represent the “decline and evil of Western civilization.” Severe punishments were levied for sodomy, particularly during the Cultural Revolution.

**Reform.** Only at the end of the 1970s, parallel to the huge change in population policy, did the Maoist influence ease. No longer was reproductive sex the only authorized form. A few Western movies were allowed, with even animated Disney films offering a startling contrast to previous fare – for after all, *Sleeping Beauty* is kissed on the lips, something many Chinese teenagers had never seen (a revelation that drew shocked comments from remaining Maoist purists).

The strictest communist approach to sexuality was, obviously, bounded in time, and by the 1990s seemed an increasingly distant memory. It stands however as an intriguing facet of 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, a reminder that the global history of sexuality remains varied and complex.

*Study Questions*

1. Were there any significant differences between the Maoist and Soviet approaches to sexuality?
2. Why did the change in population policy in the late 1970s shift the context for sexuality?

*Further reading:*

“Secrets Revealed: sex talk under Mao’s Communist Puritanism.” By Huai Bao. In *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* (10:1, Feb., 2020).

## SEXUALITY AND GLOBALIZATION

The combination of various forms of global communication and the increasing industrialization and urbanization of much of the world linked globalization and sexuality in many ways particularly during the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the basic sexual patterns that first took hold in the West and Japan spread more widely: for example, dramatic decreases in family size and the reduced focus on reproductive sex. Satellite television transmission, the spread of movies and animation, and ultimately the Internet provided growing awareness of the kind of public culture developed in the advanced industrial zone. For example, beauty pageants, including swimsuit competitions, became popular almost everywhere (though with some conservative and feminist lament).

But globalization also introduced some other themes, such as the often brutal international sex trade and sex tourism. Concern about the global transmission of sex-related diseases, though not a new subject, intensified.

Globalization also, finally, highlighted continued regional variations in sexual attitudes and expectations, and even some troubling regional distinctions in probable rates of sexual violence. Globalization generated new efforts to interfere with some regional patterns, usually on the basis of human rights values. The mixture of common trends and regional variations was predictable but complex.

**Global patterns.** Birth control measures, to control family populations but also facilitate recreational sex, spread widely. During the final decades of the Soviet Union abortion continued to be a widespread option, and fears of cancer limited the use of oral contraceptives. But in 1991 a new Family Planning Association emerged to promote alternative approaches, and condom use expanded. China's turn to birth control after 1978 dramatically altered family patterns, leading to more abortions (including some forced abortions), but also more use of artificial devices. In Hong Kong 65% of all families were using contraception by the 1990s, and reliance on female sterilization (after a first birth) also expanded. Contraception also spread in the Middle East, particularly among more secular families – 71% use for example in Turkey in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. Birth control efforts also expanded in Latin America, despite Catholic opposition and also unusually fierce male objection to the use of condoms. Most governments supported birth control, including use of the pill, and many women joined in, sometimes taking the pill without the knowledge of their husbands or priests, often after they had had two children.

**Public culture.** Changes in public culture gained some common global resonance. In China, erotic materials, translations of Western books on sexuality, and suggestive scenes in movies and advertisements expanded rapidly after the end of the Mao regime, along with a flourishing pornographic industry. Discussions and portrayals of sex in Latin America, and in places like Brazil the growing popularity of revealing beachwear, introduced significant new themes. Latin American men also became enthusiastic users of Viagra, even before later age, in the enthusiasm for sexual performance. The fall of the Soviet Union ushered in a sea change in public culture, including the first movie sex scene in Russian history, in 1998.

Here, however, there were some important regional holdouts, most notably in the Middle East and North Korea, where tight religious and/or governmental controls limited cultural expression. Even here, however, access to Internet pornography could introduce new variety by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And several Middle Eastern countries, eager for tourism, had to ease certain restrictions. Several nude beaches and pools opened in Turkey, and while this was not true in Dubai, scanty swim suits were acceptable. These concessions could introduce some confusing tensions in local culture, particularly male culture.

**Behaviors.** In several regions, premarital sexual activity increased. By the 1990s age of first sexual experience averaged 17 in Russia – a drop, but less dramatic than in the West. Teenage sexuality expanded in many parts of Latin America, though amid disapproval particularly where women were involved. A Brazilian magazine in 1995 proudly proclaimed, "Sex is no longer a sin.... Teenagers are freer to choose their own sexual initiation." Dating spread in post-Mao China, though at a later age than in the West and with fewer likely sexual partners. In behavioral category, while there were some common trends, regional variations remained considerable. In the Middle East and India, male oversight of female

sexuality remained pervasive, with family members frequently punishing daughters or sisters for misdeeds – sometimes including honor killings.

**Sex for sale.** Commercial sex remained important in many places, and undoubtedly gained ground with urbanization and its dislocations. In Africa, some women continued to serve as consorts for wealthy men, maintaining an older pattern. Rural poverty forced many women into prostitution in the cities, sometimes crossing borders to sell their services: there were 200,000 Nepalese prostitutes in India by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, valued among other things for their light skin. The fall of communism and ensuing economic disruptions forced many East European women into prostitution, particularly during the 1990s: highways from Germany into Czechoslovakia were lined with women trying to sell their services to incoming motorists.

These general patterns increasingly bled into sexual tourism and heightened international sex trafficking. Hundreds of thousands of women from Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe were trafficked, often into centers in East or Southeast Asia, where they were regarded as exotic and highly sexed. By 2008 500,000 East European women were serving as prostitutes in the European Union. Many East African women were trafficked into other parts of Africa, sometimes promised jobs as nannies but then raped and drafted into prostitution. Worldwide, a 2005 report suggested that 600-800,000 women were being trafficked each year. Some were duped, some were simply struggling against poverty. Some even saw sexual service as a way to escape traditional family controls: in parts of West Africa, some prostitutes were simply known as “modern women”.

Sex tourism arose in many centers, as in several parts of Latin America, Thailand, Crimea, and elsewhere, where men from wealthier countries were able to combine a vacation with access to a variety of prostitutes. Sex tours to Thailand were openly billed under headings like “anything goes in this exotic country.” Some sex tourists paid a premium to be serviced by a virgin. On the user side, by 2000 Canadians were estimated to be spending \$400,000 a year on sex tourism, while figures for the United States, Germany and Japan were much higher

**Disease.** New and old sexual habits, both the continued vitality of prostitution and the expansion of sexual activity before marriage, generated growing concern about sexually transmitted disease. The surge of attention to AIDs, from the 1980s onward, introduced a host of global accusations. Indians widely blamed Nepalese women, Russians and Chinese blamed foreigners, many Americans blamed gays. A number of countries, such as Thailand, tried to place new limits on prostitution, often without much success, or at least to promote condom use. After the initial flurry problems proved most acute and stubborn in southern and eastern Africa, where heavy use of urban prostitutes combined with a widespread male reluctance to use condoms (along with male ability to convince female partners to acquiesce). Medical treatments and strong government programs did begin to curtail (but not eliminate) the problem by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Sexual violence.** Confusing changes in sexuality provided new reasons for sexual violence, particularly in certain regions. In some Islamic countries men might see violence as a means of keeping increasingly educated women in their place. In Pakistan, for example, women who wore Western dress risked male attack, even by other family members; and punishments for this violence were light to nonexistent. In India, young women walking to school risked sexual attack; in 1987 a book entitled *How to Rape*, was published in Mumbai – and it included advice on how to avoid punishment. Sexual violence was not new, of course, and it could occur anywhere, but it seemed particularly concentrated in regions like the Middle East and South Asia that had long emphasized women’s seclusion.

By the later 20<sup>th</sup> century globalization was clearly promoting a confusing mixture of common trends, new or intensified sexual problems, and varied regional reactions. Overall, global processes both expressed and promoted difficult confrontations between old and new sexual standards.

Study questions:

1. Can a “globalization pattern” of sexuality be defined, or are regional and individual variations predominant?
2. What were the conditions for the expansion of sex trafficking and sex tourism?



### 3. How did globalization both facilitate and complicate changes in gender sexual norms?

Further reading:

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*Global Sex.* D. Altman (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

*Sex and Russian Society.* I. Kon and J. Riordan (Indiana University Press, 1993).

*Appetites: food and sex in post-socialist China.* J. Farquhar (Duke University Press, 2002).

*Intimacies: love and sex across cultures.* Ed. W.R. Jankowiak (Columbia University Press, 2008).

*Indian Feminisms law, patriarchies and violence in India.* G. Gangoli (Ashgate, 2007).

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*Policing Pleasure: sex work, policy and the state in global perspective.* Eds. Susan Dewey and Patty Kelly (New York University Press, 2011).

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### SEXUALITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Only two decades have passed so far in the new century, and it is obvious from the history of sexuality that crucial changes often emerge over a period of time – so any judgments about new patterns must be quite tentative. Further, many of the trends established during the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly persist. Birth rates continue to drop globally – indeed in many regions, past the point of population replacement; there certainly is no surge of reproductive sex. In some settings, casual sexual arrangements became more common, as in the spread of what was called “hook up” culture on college campuses: brief sexual episodes with no emotional commitment, sometimes arranged on the Internet. A highly sexualized public culture remains widely current, including the massive expansion of the availability and use of pornography, while problems such as sex trafficking continue to be troubling despite a variety of national and international efforts. Regional differences continue to reflect earlier traditions, particularly religious prescriptions, leading to considerable disagreements within the global framework. Amid these important continuities, however, three or four developments could not have been fully anticipated as the century opened, and deserve attention as part of completing the history of sexuality to this point.

**Islamic extremism and other cults.** The rise of a militant extreme within Islam, and particularly the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), though most noteworthy for its promotion of terrorism, had a distinctive take on sexuality – part traditional, part simply vicious. ISIS leaders strongly objected to Western sexual culture, touting what they saw as Islamic purity. Muslim women in the group were pressed to have children, emphasizing the importance of reproductive sex. But the group also seized hundreds of women of other denominations, including some of the Shi’a faith, treating them as sex slaves and subjecting them to repeated rape. Besides offering an inducement to ISIS men, leaders claimed this pattern was justified by original Islam, with sex used as a weapon against false beliefs. The women involved were carefully administered birth control pills and checked regularly, as ISIS honored an obscure passage in Islamic law which said that slaves used for sex must not be pregnant. While this behavior aroused massive protest from most of the groups involved, and from human rights organizations, some Shi’a families, believing their women had been dishonored, stayed silent.

Smaller sex cults also developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, sometimes associated with religious claims of self-proclaimed Hindu or Christian prophets. In the United States a pseudo-business formed by Keith Raniere in 1998 recruited large numbers of women, purportedly for personal development including training in Extra Sensory Perception, subjecting many to intense psychological pressure including requirements of regular sex with the leader.

Hopefully, no large trend emerged with these developments, which did serve as a reminder of how various doctrines can still be distorted to serve male predators.

**Global disputes over same-sex behaviors.** Support for a variety of gay rights, from tolerance of open displays of affection in public from same-sex partners to the dramatic idea of gay marriage, rose with unusual rapidity throughout Western society, from the 1980s onward. Approving references in the media and television moved in the same direction. The trend reflected vigorous advocacy on the part of gay groups plus the changes in wider ideas about sexuality. Denmark became the first country effectively to legalize gay marriage, in 1989. Public opinion in the United States changed with startling rapidity: in the early 1980s only 32% of the population supported gay marriage, but by 2020 the figure had soared to 73%. Bitter conservative opposition remained, particularly among some Christian groups: official doctrine remained unchanged in Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism. But the overall transformation was impressive and seemingly solid.

On a global level, however, Western trends provoked widespread resistance – often most intense, ironically, in regions that had only converted to intolerance under Western pressure a century and a half before. Homosexuality was taken as another sign of Western sexual license, to be resisted as a foreign intrusion; or, in other Christian majority regions, such as Latin America and parts of Africa, adamant traditional hostilities simply persisted. Legal strictures shifted in only a few Latin American countries (communist Cuba also maintained tight restrictions), and in Africa only tolerant post-apartheid South Africa opened the door.

Some African countries, like Uganda, even threatened to stiffen dire penalties against same-sex behaviors. Resistance in the Middle East was widespread, and police treatment of known homosexuals, including foreigners, worsened in places like Dubai. One small Muslim country (Bhutan) threatened capital punishment, though it backed away from actual enforcement. Even Turkey became less tolerant officially. Under Vladimir Putin Russia held itself out as a great Orthodox bastion against homosexuality, with appeals to “cleanse” the country of the vice. Same-sex couples were harassed, and favorable public references were banned.

A few countries gradually shifted to at least somewhat greater openness: Indian courts ruled that homosexuality was a human right, and Taiwan took the lead on gay marriage in East Asia. Still, attitudes and policies toward same-sex behaviors, and people, shaped up to be one of the regional battlegrounds of contemporary sexuality.

**New boundaries and the ambivalence of feminism.** Several developments in the West suggested some serious reconsideration of the changes in sexual culture that had occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, while pornography became increasingly available, new levels of policing were directed against child pornography. Widespread publicity of sex scandals among groups like the Catholic clergy or boy scout leaders heightened a realization of the downsides of sexual drives.

Another and more novel tension arose over definitions of appropriate heterosexual behaviors, primarily by males. Trends in the 1960s had emphasized sexual opportunities for women, and the importance of seeking pleasure; but these had been accompanied by films, advertisements and even changes in dress styles that disproportionately stressed female sexual attractiveness. And these developments occurred as men and women were interacting more regularly in schools and the workplace. This combination led both to new problems and to new efforts to set boundary lines that would subject certain behaviors, primarily by men, to new legal penalties or to social shaming. Recalculations by feminists played a major role in this complex shift.

The term sexual harassment was coined, in North America (first, apparently, in Toronto), in the 1970s. The term date rape was introduced in the same decade, again in North America. The new vocabulary

sought to identify and reprove sexual behaviors that were both very old and in some cases quite new. The terminology represented efforts to set new limitations on sexual activity, modifying the open-endedness of Western sexual culture.

Specific problems included office situations where coworkers, mainly male, ventured suggestive comments or behaviors (such as touching), sometimes using sex as a bargaining chip in promotions. Date rape reflected the rise of unchaperoned dating activity on college campuses, affected as well by growing sexual expectations by some male partners and an unwillingness to take no for an answer; high rates of alcohol consumption often complicated the transaction, with women realizing (or claiming) violation only after the fact.

In the larger sense, the new guidelines sought to revive shaming as a regulator of sexual behavior (though in the case of date rape, criminal prosecution was also involved). In deep contrast to traditional standards, the new wisdom tended to assume that women, rather than men, were to be credited in testimony.

**Me/Too movement** The effort was further extended by the rise of the Me/Too movement, first broached in 2006 and then taking off after 2017, in which large numbers of women reported past episodes of intimidation and abuse. This was an extension of the campaign against harassment, but now often directed at powerful men whose behaviors ranged from innuendo and exposure of body parts to physical assault. Here too, a much older practice – the ability of rich men to assemble a group of female sexual partners – was under attack, again through a combination of public shaming (often leading to job loss) and legal prosecution.

The movement began in the United States, but quickly echoed in much (though not all) of Western Europe. Individual echoes of Me/Too occurred almost everywhere, as courageous women stepped forward to report abuse. However, the overall campaign made less headway against more macho sexual cultures in places like Russia and Latin America. (and even in the West, the movement remained disproportionately upper middle class). But fledgling movements emerged amid new protests in East Asia and India, though it was not clear if a larger current would develop. In most of the West, however, the new, if informal, rules added an important complexity to the sexual standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**A decline of sex?** The most intriguing and unexpected innovation in sexual behavior in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least in a few countries like Japan and the United States, was an apparent decline of sexual activity of any sort, at least beyond pornographic titillation and masturbation. In the United States, careful surveys (on an admittedly difficult topic) suggested a drop in average frequency of sexual intercourse from 60 to 53 times per year in the age group 18-49. Studies of the college age population showed a marked decline in casual sex among both men and women (despite some persistence of hook-up sex). In Japan, recent polls among the age group 18-34 showed 28% of men, 23% of women had no interest in a sexual relationship, while over a quarter of all people aged 35-39 had no sexual experience at all. Many Japanese marriages also were termed “sexless”, with only occasional sexual activity. A 2019 study in the UK found a third of all adults reporting no sex in the past month, up from a quarter in 2001. And whereas previously 20% of both women and men had reported having sex at least 10 times a month, the 2019 figure stood at 13% (women) and 14% (men). It was not yet clear how many other advanced industrial countries were experiencing similar trends.

But the data are fascinating. Obviously the new trends relate to declining birth rates in these regions, but given the wide availability of birth control devices the behaviors are responding at least in part to other factors than a desire to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

**Causes.** Possibilities include: declining sperm counts due to pollution (a measurable phenomenon).

--The impact of control programs, for example on college campuses; young Americans are drinking less in part to avoid the circumstances of date rape. Wider publicity given to sexual misbehavior – by the Me/Too movement, by scandals in the Catholic priesthood – may also be having a daunting effect.

--Wide availability of Internet pornography, another measurable change as usage has soared since the 1990s. Here, two factors are involved: increased solitary masturbation but also self-doubts caused by the idealized bodies and sexual organs of the porn stars. (Denmark interestingly introduced a program

showing normal naked bodies in sexual education classes, to help convince young people that they were not deficient.)

-Growing isolation and loneliness of many adults, in various age groups.

-Simply a sense, amid all the hype in public culture, that sexual relationships were too much trouble, emotionally burdensome.

-And finally, some authorities suggested, the fatigue and pace of modern life.

Unsurprisingly, finally, given fears of contagion, sexual activity dropped still further during the global pandemic (even though, theoretically, it could have been a recourse at least for cohabiting couples).

*Conclusion.* The new or heightened trends of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly those that pushed against some of the sexual climate of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, were fascinating, certainly important to monitor in the next few decades. At the same time, divisions in responses provided new evidence of the importance of regional conditions even in a global age.

*Study questions:*

1. What are some of the most important regional divisions around current sexual issues and behaviors?
2. Are some countries entering a major new period in their sexual history (compared to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century)? What are the key criteria?
3. Is contemporary pornography transforming sexual behaviors?
4. To what extent do modern sexual trends pose special dilemmas for feminism?

*Further reading:*

*Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: the case of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.* By Sali Bitar (Masters thesis, Uppsala University, 2015).

"Why Are Fewer Young Adults Having Casual Sex?". By Scott South and Lei Lei. In *Socius: sociological research for a dynamic world* (Mar. 1, 2021).

"British People Having Less Sex Than Previously," *BBC News*, May 8, 2019.

*Pornification: sex and sexuality in media culture.* By K. Nikunen and L. Saarenmaa (Oxford University Press, 2007).

*Pornified: how pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships, and our families.* By Pamela Paul (Owl Books, 2005).