

OPINION



Are we entitled to sex?

My celibacy put me in the crosshairs of men's rights activists and feminists alike

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When I was 16, I decided to wait to have sex until I was married, based on my religious principles. When I reached my late twenties and was still single — partly because of bad timing and partly because of my pursuit of men who turned out to be noncommittal — I decided to wait until I was in a mutually committed and loving relationship to have sex.

At 37, I'm still waiting. And while I recognize that my self-confidence and ironclad willpower may have created a perpetual pursuit, I can't deny what I feel in my gut to be sacred. For me, sexual union must involve deep emotional commitment to have value. Otherwise, it is reduced to any other pleasant bodily activity, like eating or exercising.

Science supports this sentiment: Studies show that for women, exclusively penile-vaginal intercourse (above all other sexual interactions) results in stronger attachment and better intimacy. Women also release [higher levels of the relationship bonding neurochemical oxytocin](#) than men during sexual activity. Why would I want to bond in such a way with someone who doesn't love me or isn't committed?

When I wrote about my virginity in an essay for The New York Times in 2013 — titled “Does my virginity have a shelf life?” — I received a variety of messages from men suggesting it did indeed have an expiration date. I was told I was selfish for not having sex with men I dated and that I am a mean tease for being intimate with men, but not having sex with them. One man even said, “You need to learn how to give more than you receive.”

Equally vicious were the e-mails from my fellow feminists. They too, talked about entitlement and suggested that it is my human right to have sex. By abstaining, they said I was relenting to pressures set up by a patriarchal society.

Celibacy makes strange bedfellows. Feminists and misogynists both say that if you aren’t having sex, there’s something wrong with you: You’re not playing for the team.

Consider, though, that young people are losing their virginity slightly later in life. From 1991 to 2013 the proportion of high school students who have had sex [declined](#) (PDF) from 54 percent to 47 percent, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For the same time period, the percentage of high school students with 4 or more partners declined from 18.7 percent to 15 percent.

If fewer young people are having sexual intercourse today, then why does the prevailing social view continue to tell us we are not complete unless we are having sex — that it’s in fact an entitlement?

The incel mindset

Many of the men who sent me nasty emails after I published my essay might be labeled “incels” (involuntarily celibate). Its most recent poster boy was 22-year-old virgin Elliot Rodger, who went on a murder spree last year in Isla Vista, California. Rodger felt spurned by the women who were having sex with other men on campus and entitled to get laid.

Rodger may appear to be an outlier, but there's a growing community of angry, sexually dissatisfied men who blame both women and other men for their situation. Rodger's initials have become permanent glossary entries on men's rights activism (MRA) websites. The Red Pill Movement, according to one MRA forum, seeks to spread awareness of the negative effects of "feminism, feminists and their white-knight enablers ... and to seek truth no matter how painful or inconvenient the truth may be." For these men the "truth" lies in getting laid, no matter the consequences. In today's sex-positive society, as sex becomes increasingly synonymous with human rights, incels feel denied what they consider "rightfully" theirs.

Does one woman have the right to tell another woman what isn't sensually valuable or a wise investment?

Incel-sympathizing turns sex into an entitlement, a mindset that bleeds into popular culture. Consider the scene from the film "Bridesmaids" in which Kristen Wiig's character Annie, stranded on the road after her car dies, calls a casual hook-up buddy to pick her up. He does, only to suggest she give him oral sex in exchange for his kindness.

"You can totally lie down in my lap if you want," he says. "Just take a little lap nap ... if you want ... open for biz." It's an expectation we see in movies over and over: men putting in a certain amount of time with a woman and expecting sex as a reward.

The pro-sex effect

But it's not just men's rights activists — and their pop culture equivalents — that are clamoring to say that sex is an entitlement. Women of disparate generations are using the same argument.

A 35-year-old single friend was advised by her mother to have sex before marriage. "Go for it!" she was told. "You have the right to feel pleasure." Several

friends tell me that their feminist moms similarly encouraged them to have sex because it was a right earned by their foremothers.

Just because we have the option to have sex, though, doesn't mean we're betraying our feminist forebears if we choose to refrain. Americans in the 1960s were outraged with women who chose a career over having kids. Today's feminists tend to get huffy about women who choose not to have sex. According to Kira Hall, a linguistics and anthropology professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder, sex-positivism in our society has increased exponentially since feminists began to make the argument for the importance of sexual freedom for women. But, she explained, "When society is saying 'yes' to sex, it is hard for those in more vulnerable positions to say 'no.'" In a purely pro-sex celebratory society, feminists who consider how sexual practices may produce unequal power arrangements often run the risk of being characterized as 'sex-negative.'"

This is how my essay was received by many feminists. The writer Laura Beck, responding to my Times essay, [wrote a piece](#) for Cosmopolitan.com called, "Saving your virginity won't save your dignity." Beck wrote, "Holding onto your virginity like it's some magical talisman that wards away evil and keeps you pure and safe is not only a lapse in logic, but brings up the important question of why virginity is such a valuable commodity. How many buckets of salt will it fetch you?"

Does one woman have the right to tell another woman what isn't sensually valuable or a wise investment, though? Arguing against the freedom to choose what to do with one's own body is akin to telling a woman what to do with an unwanted pregnancy.

Beyond cultural norms

Why is there now, more than ever, a voiced feeling of sexual entitlement, from both men and women? Perhaps it's the United States' sex-obsessed culture, combined with its competitive capitalistic principles, that causes an individual's value to be defined so often by the number of sexual partners he or she has had.

(Last month, I came across a Valentine's Day sale item — an "I Owe You Sex" coupon book, written by women for women. There were coupons for a "nooner" and a night "downtown." Women buy, literally and figuratively, the idea that having lots of sex is empowering.)

Even the way we talk about sex perpetuates the language of implied entitlement. A friend recently told me about how a mutual friend's boyfriend of two years, and the only man she ever had sex with, suddenly ended the relationship. "What sunk costs!" my friend sighed. "And she invested so much." By which she meant losing her virginity to a seemingly loving and committed partner — something I also would have done had I been in her situation. Even so, she didn't get the long-term relationship she expected.

In other words, the entitlement argument holds equally true for those of us who wait to have sex: When we finally do take the plunge, we may feel that we deserve a loving, committed relationship that lasts. But that's not the case. Despite cultural norms that tell us otherwise, sex, a commitment, a ring, even a fulfilling relationship — none of it is guaranteed. The only guarantee in life is what you can protect — in my case, my choice to wait and my belief that a committed and loving partner for myself exists. If, like every American, I'm entitled to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," that sounds a lot like choosing to have sex with whom, and when, I want.

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