



Global sex: sexuality and sexual practices around the world*

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ABSTRACT Sex: this most universal experience comes complete with an array of international similarities and some surprising differences—from country to country; between different ages, genders and cultures; and from the intensely personal to the economic and political. This essentially private activity often raises public and legal issues, even invoking the death penalty. Researching sex on a worldwide, comparable basis is not easy. There is no central depository for global sex information (in contrast to the World Health Organisation's databank of health statistics); very few sexology institutes or specialists exist in most countries; and only a handful of countries have comprehensive statistics. Sex research, where it exists, is usually fertility-related, rather than sex-orientated. Even definitions vary, for example of 'sex counselling', 'obscenity', or 'normal sex'. This paper explores global sexual practices, key comparative indicators such as laws and attitudes towards sexual orientation; availability of sex education and counselling; marriage, divorce, and adultery; reproductive health, safe sex and cloning; sexually transmitted infections; pornography and degrees of state censorship; religious attitudes; prostitution and sex tourism; sex crimes such as rape, harassment and stalking; and speculates on the future of sex.

Professor Erwin J. Haeberle, Director, Archive of Sexology at the Robert Koch Institute, Berlin has stated:

Now that we have entered the age of economic globalization, it is becoming increasingly important for sexologists and other health professionals to take a global view of sexual health as well. (Mackay, 2000)

This paper is divided into two components—first, the difficulties of global research on sex, and second, some selected findings.

Global sex research

After people are clothed and fed, then they think about sex.

K'ung Fu-Tzu (Confucius) 551–479 BC

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People may think about sex, but researching sex on a worldwide, comparable basis is not easy for the following reasons:

1. Very few sexology institutes or specialists exist in most countries, especially developing countries.
2. Only a handful of Western countries have comprehensive statistics.
3. There is no central depository for global sex data (in contrast to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) databank of health statistics) (Haeberle, 2000). For example, there are almost no archives of quantitative research on sexual practices; international sex-related legislation or regulations and enforcement; data on economic aspects of sex; public opinion surveys; or trends. There is not even a global coordinating organization for sex counselling, which has further implications for the definition of terms, ethical standards and training.
4. Quantitative data seem particularly difficult to obtain; qualitative data, while valid, are less suitable for international comparative analyses.
5. Sex research, where it exists, is often fertility-related, rather than sexorientated. The most complete data sets are for pregnancy, infertility, contraception and AIDS and, to a lesser extent, legal minimum age of marriage, and divorce.
6. There has been a lack of standardization of terms in many areas of sex research. For example, in the tobacco field there are exact terms to define a smoker (daily smoker, aged 15 years and over), initially suggested by WHO and now used by all countries in the world. This enables comparable analyses.
7. Definitions vary: 'sex counselling' can be used for in-depth specific psychosexual counselling, while others use the term when condoms are distributed. 'obscenity' is particularly difficult to define, as the concept varies from person to person, country to country, and from one time to another. This is reflected in the confusion of laws on obscenity, which in some countries are complaint-driven, or are widely disregarded in others. Even the definition of 'sex' causes confusion. In the USA in 1999 two-thirds of respondents in a survey reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* believed that oral-genital contact did not constitute 'having sex', and one in five thought the same about anal intercourse (Sanders & Reinisch (1999).
8. Poor data are reported—although this is certainly not confined to the discipline of sexology. Some surveys, for example those on rarer issues, such as unconsummated marriages or uncommon sex problems, are justified in reporting small sample size surveys. But at the 14th World Congress of Sexology in 1999, studies from some parts of the world were reported with 8% response rates to questions on 'the best sexual moment of my life', or a sample of 100 persons had been asked their opinion on infidelity.
9. Imprecise terms are used in data collection. For example, one study defined the age category as '40 years and above' which in reality was 40–45 years.

Studies conducted on only the sexually active have been reported as national surveys.

10. Even where laws exist, they may be widely disregarded, such as the fact that parental decisions can override the legal minimal age of marriage in many countries.

Yet quantitative data are needed to plan interventions: for example, there is no point planning sex education at the age of 15 if many young people are having sex at 13 years of age. Health facilities for AIDS, pregnancy, contraception, sex counselling, sexual abuse and many other topics can also only be planned on the basis of epidemiological information.

Global sex research: selected findings

The sex drive

One of the most intriguing questions to arise from the research is why do humans have sex at all? After all, evolutionary biologists believe it is only 300 million years ago that sexual reproduction was first seen in animals. Asexual reproduction allows for rapid increases in the number of individuals; uses less energy, requires less time, does not require a mate, and all genetic material is passed to the next generation. Biologists explain that sexual reproduction reduces susceptibility to parasites. It also creates new variants, making extinction less likely through better adaptation to changing environments, and dilutes disadvantageous genes. But mates may be scarce or uncooperative.

Sex in the animal kingdom, even among primates, is diverse. Some animals copulate frequently with a huge number of different partners, while others are monogamous for life. The key seems to be the survival advantage to offspring offered by different mating patterns.

Testicular size directly relates to the amount of sperm competition from other males. In primates, the proportionately larger the testes, the more polygamous or promiscuous. The human male testis is sized halfway between that of a pygmy chimp (largest) and that of a gorilla or gibbon (smallest).

Males must compete to impregnate, while all fertile females are virtually assured of finding a mate. This is why males are mostly larger and, in animal species, more colourful. Human males are extremely lucky in that society has evolved a social system that enables most of them to have sex, rather than the majority roaming in bachelor packs, destined never to mate.

Teen sex

The average age of first sex varies widely around the world, especially for girls. It is still significantly later in Asia and Latin America than in Africa, Europe and North America. (Hubert *et al.*, 1998; *Demographic and Health Surveys* (1999).

In the USA sexual activity among teenagers climbed steadily from 1970 but then fell 11% during the 1990s, with more condom use and fewer teen pregnancies

(Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1997). In the UK the trend is in the opposite direction. While in 1957 only 1% of girls and boys reported having had sex before 16 years of age, this rose to 25% of boys and 20% of girls in 1997 (MacLeod, 1997), with one in every 100 girls aged 13–15 becoming pregnant (Gentleman (1998). Research from 53 rich and poor countries indicates that many teenage girls feel coerced into having sex. In the USA 40% of girls who had sex before 15 said they were forced into it (Gentleman (1998).

In general, teenagers have sex at an earlier age (15–16) than their parents' generation (18), but this trend may be levelling off and even reversing in some countries (Durex, 1996).

Sexual practices

Except in a very few countries, we have no idea what people do 'in bed.' Even in careful, representative surveys, the accuracy of data can be questionable, as respondents may report an exaggerated frequency of sex, or an underestimation for masturbation, cross-dressing or same-sex activity, especially in sexually conservative countries.

Some surveys only interview sexually active people, so the views of the sexually inactive are not represented, although they form a substantial segment of society. For example, in a national survey in the USA, 30% of men and 28% of women were celibate or had sex only a few times each year (Michael *et al.*, 1994). Internet surveys are also far from typical, as they tend to attract mostly male respondents, with an average age of under 25 years.

What is clear is that sexual practices, in all their variety, are universal. In the UK the average person spends 3.5 years of their life eating, 2.5 years talking on the phone, two weeks kissing and has sex 2580 times with five different people (AFP, 1998).

Married or not, people have significantly less sex as they get older, although decline in the frequency of sex has more to do with the length of marriage or the relationship than with age. The frequency of sex varies according to culture. Sex after the age of 40 is significantly lower in some parts of Asia compared with the West. In India, for example, many couples abstain from sex at 50, or where a woman has a married daughter or becomes a grandmother (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 1979).

In the Durex survey of frequency of sexual intercourse of sexually active 16–45 year-olds, the average French respondent had sex 141 times a year, the American 138 times a year, the British 112, with the lowest in Hong Kong at 57 (Durex, 1996, 1998).

Sex is not safe enough: only 40% of 16–45 year olds in the UK always use a condom with a casual partner, compared with 69% in France, 56% in the USA and 48% in Italy. But this is higher than in Spain (36%), Germany (32%), Canada (25%) Russia (28%) and Poland (20%) (Durex, 1996).

Gender orientation

Between 3% and 4% of the world's adult male population, and 1.5% and 2% of the world's female population, are living exclusively as homosexuals. This is not the total number of homosexuals. It also does not include youth, when experimentation occurs (Coleman, 1999). At least 450 species of birds and mammals have been found to engage in same-sex activity (Bagemihi, 1999).

Homosexuality is evident early in life. So far biomedical research has failed to show a 'cause', although research into genetics, hormones and upbringing is continuing. Research in Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and the USA has shown that lesbian sexuality and identity eventually emerge, regardless of culture (Whitam *et al.*, 1998).

Legislation is slowly changing, but homosexuality is still illegal in about 50 countries and, for men only, in a further 50 countries (International Lesbian and Gay Association, 2000). Even in countries which have decriminalized homosexuality, gays and lesbians are often still subject to harassment, discrimination, violence and persecution by the government, police, employers, and by the population at large.

There are eight countries with the death penalty for homosexuality: Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (Amnesty International, 1999). Yet the news is not all gloomy. The numbers attending the Gay Pride March in London have increased from 1000 in the first march held in 1972, to hundreds of thousands by 2000 (Saxton, 1995).

Dating

In the UK 80% of teenage girls under 20 have had sex on dates (UNAIDS, 1999; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1998: 19, Table 3a). In the USA nowadays girls begin to date on average at the age of 12 or 13, and boys at 13 and 14 (Oswald, 1999). Among adolescents 24% risk date rape, as do 20% of college-aged women (Rickert & Wiemann, 1998).

The most modern form of dating is on the internet. Cyberdating is mostly used by men looking for women and, as a result, women get about 50 times more replies to their personal advertisements than do men. Also, prostitution is moving from the streets to on-line dating agencies.

Hundreds of thousands of people engage in virtual sex in cyberspace every day—whereby two people (at minimum) 'talk' each other through sex on an internet keyboard, with masturbation to orgasm. Twelve percent of 35 000 self-selected respondents to an internet survey said they had had sex with someone they met online (Perry, 1995–1999).

Choose your partner

Marriages are arranged for 60% of couples in the world, many of whom do not meet

their partner until the wedding. A second surprise for people in the West is that in most cases parents make wise and considered choices for their children.

When couples themselves choose, worldwide men prefer younger women and women prefer older men. Men prize physical attraction, while women look for providers—for ‘dads not cads’. (Buss, 1989).

In a wide variety of cultures, men and women look for the same top four qualities in choosing a mate: mutual attraction and love, dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, and a pleasing disposition (Buss, 1990).

Marriage

In all countries the age at which females are permitted to marry is the same as, or earlier than, that for males. The youngest age at which a man can marry is at 14 in Chile and Paraguay, and the country with the highest permitted minimum age is China, where a man has to be 22 years of age before he can marry. The law is widely disregarded in some countries. (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 1996).

The global average age of marriage for girls is 22 years old; the country with the youngest average is Mali, at 16.4 years, and the country with the oldest is Sweden at 27.8 years. In the UK it is 26 years (Population Reference Bureau, 1992, 1994).

Men increasingly outnumber women in China so that currently one in six men will not be able to find a wife (AFP, 1999).

Most studies show that good sex is important to a marriage but, in countries that have researched the factors for a happy marriage, sex does not feature in the top five categories.

Overall married couples in the USA have more sex than the non-married. Only 15% of married men and women never have sex or at most a few times a year, compared with about half of single men and women (Michael *et al.*, 1994: 116, Table 8).

Adultery

The percentage of sexually active 16–45 year olds admitting to having been sexually unfaithful are: 42% of British, compared with 50% of Americans, 40% of Germans and Mexicans, 36% of French, and 22% of Spanish (Durex, 1998).

Infidelity starts early. In the Durex 1999 survey of 14 countries around the globe, 34% of sexually active young people between 16 and 21 years of age (40% of men, 28% of women) said they had experienced a sexual relationship with more than one person at a time. 31% of British teenagers admit to having been unfaithful. Thai males are the most unfaithful (52%), followed by Americans (43% males and females), then youngsters from Greece and the Czech Republic (both 38%) (Durex, 1999).

There are four countries with the death penalty for adultery: Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, although there have been no recent executions unless other crimes were involved (Amnesty International, 1999).

Divorce

Divorce rates vary hugely around the world. The lowest rate is in Afghanistan, where divorce is virtually unknown, followed by Spain, India, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Ecuador. The highest is in Hungary, followed by the USA and the Central African Republic. The divorce rates in the USA are about double those in the UK. There are different grounds for divorce for men and for women in more than 30 Islamic, Asian and some African countries (US Bureau of the Census, 1999).

Reproductive health

Contraceptive prevalence among married British women aged 15–49 is high at 84%, virtually all using modern methods. This compares with 75% in France and Germany, 71% in the USA, 59% in Spain and less than 10% in many parts of Africa (Population Action International, 1997).

Even in countries such as the USA and the UK, where contraception is easily obtainable, more than half of pregnancies are unplanned (WHO, 1990–1991).

The UK birth rate is low at 1.7 births in a woman's life. The birth rate is less than two births for most of Europe and Asia, in contrast to Africa, where birth rates in some countries are as high as seven (US Bureau of the Census, 1998).

Of the 41 700 children born to mothers aged 15–19 each year in the UK, 87% are born outside marriage, the highest level of unmarried teenage motherhood in the world. That compares with 78% in France, 62% in the USA, 57% in Germany and 10% in Japan (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1998: 52, Appendix Table 4).

Six percent of couples in the UK are infertile, comparable with the rest of Europe and Asia, but contrasting with much higher rates in Africa, that can reach over 20%. (Population Action International, 1995).

The percentage of 16–45 year olds who always use a condom with a casual partner is 82% of Thais, 69% of the French, 56% of Americans, 48% of Italians, 40% of British, 36% of Spanish and 32% of Germans, ahead of Canada and Poland at less than 25% (Durex, 1996).

Sex education

Finding out about sex is often hindered by laws, regulations, policies and public opposition—to sex education in schools, to disseminating sex and family planning information, to advertising, displaying and providing contraceptives—and by censorship laws governing obscenity. Good sexual practices end up being discovered, often in a haphazard manner, rather than taught.

What information young people glean comes primarily from their friends, school, books, sex partners and parents. Since the mid1990s the BBC World Service has broadcast sex programs in a number of languages around the world. The internet is a more recent source of information for many, with sites that provide information and answer questions about love, relationships and sex.

British youth usually find out about sex from school, friends and parents in that order. They receive their sex education at an average of 11.4 years, along with the Germans, Canadians and Italians. Many Asian youth have to wait two more years to learn about sex. Sex education does not encourage sex. Hundreds of studies have shown that sex education does not lead to earlier or increased sexual activity. The only exception is for programmes that teach complete abstinence as the only option (rather than as one of a range of options).

Sex problems

In countries where it has been measured, the two most common sex problems in men are impotence and premature ejaculation. The two most common sex problems in women are lack of interest in sex and not having an orgasm during sexual intercourse (Michael *et al.*, 1994). Many of these problems are much improved by counselling (McCarthy & Thorburn, 1994). Sexual problems in homosexuals are generally the same as those found in heterosexuals (Bell, 1999).

Reported sex problems in men tend to increase with age but, with the exception of a decrease in vaginal lubrication postmenopause, older women report fewer problems.

Economics of sex

Sex is a multi-billion dollar industry. Almost every aspect of sex has either some economic debit or some financial gain to the individual or the state. Sometimes there is both gain and loss at the same time—to different people involved or affected.

A great many people who work in the various sex-related fields gain, especially the organizers of the sex trade; purveyors of pornography (including film crews); sex tour operators; the film industry and writers of romantic novels. Even doctors, lawyers and priests all benefit.

Costs comprise medical and health costs, including the cost of contraception; salaries or, on the other hand, loss of earnings; administering a justice system (for example, for weddings, divorces, sex crimes); the costs of medical, legal and sociological research, journals and libraries; the costs of weddings, broken marriages, divorces and child sex abuse; and costs of sex counselling, pornography, prostitution, sex tourism and cosmetic surgery.

Measuring the overall global, even national, costs of sex in exact financial terms has never been attempted. The direct costs, such as for contraception, treatment of sexually transmitted infections, are difficult to measure, and it is even harder to quantify indirect but real costs, like the cost to the state of supporting broken families. Above all, it is impossible to put a financial value on the joy and happiness, or on the despair, that sex can bring.

It has been estimated that the simple medical and social costs of sex amount to US\$83 billion annually in the USA, \$16 billion in the UK and \$7 billion in Australia (Dixon, 1995). This does not include many other costs, such as the costs of sex education and counselling or the commercial costs of paid sex and pornography.

Statistically, it has been calculated that marriage brings as much happiness as an additional US\$100 000 in income (Blanchflower & Oswald, 1999).

Pornography and censorship

The USA is the world's leading producer (73%) of online pornography. About 13% originates in Europe, and less than 5% in Asia. Eighty percent of commercial child pornography on the internet originates from Japan.

Most users are young men. Men's use of pornography has been compared with women's consumption of romantic novels, both using fantasy to compensate for a disappointing reality.

There is heated debate over the effects of pornography among leaders, feminists, parents, religious leaders, and the community in general. For example, the liberalization of pornography laws in the USA, UK, Australia and the Scandinavian countries has been accompanied by a rise in the rates of reported rapes. But the rates of all violent crimes have increased and more women report rape, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the effect of porn upon society.

Few studies differentiate between erotica, soft and hard porn, or take into account baseline norms. It is one thing to say that x percent of rapists read pornography before committing a rape, but that statistic is meaningless unless it is known how many non-rapists read the same kind of porn. Further studies are needed to assess the effect of the various types of pornography.

All countries, in varying degree, censor nudity, pornography, paedophilia, sex acts in public and many have laws banning 'lewd', 'indecent' or 'obscene' materials, but many censorship laws and regulations are not enforced.

Attitudes towards erotica, pornography, obscenity and even sex education have fluctuated through the ages and vary from country to country. The current global trend is towards liberalization, with backlashes or reversals in some countries. While 45–54 year-olds in Finland have become more liberal over two decades in supporting the availability of porn to 16 year olds, younger people have become more conservative (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1992).

Censorship poses the policy dilemma of consumer protection, regulation and social control versus consumer choice, freedom, self-determination and personal responsibility. Some believe that pornography is a small cost to pay for defending freedom of speech, but are uncomfortable with sexual violence, paedophilia or pornography being universally available, especially to children.

Prostitution

Prostitution is a mega-dollar industry, involving two million known child prostitutes under the age of 18 years, half of whom live in Asia (EPCAT, 1994). Up to 14% of GDP in some Asian countries is estimated to be generated from prostitution (Kaban, 1998).

The legal status of prostitution varies from countries where all or certain

activities relating to prostitution are decriminalized; where it is illegal; to where it is technically illegal but widely practised or tolerated.

Sex crimes

Sexual violence is based on issues of power, control, victimization and denial. It happens in every class, culture, race, religion, and gender. It causes fear, pain, injury, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, and physical and psychological scars in the victims. Rape is not a crime of passion, but a crime of violence, domination, humiliation and violation, by the stronger of the weaker. In a study of 213 rape victims in Spain, 20% contracted a sexually transmitted infection and 10% became pregnant (MartinezAyala *et al.*, 1999).

In the UK, 3% of men report adult male rape. Over 5% of men report that they were sexually abused as children (Coxell *et al.*, 1999).

Sexual harassment is far more widespread than previously thought. Thirty percent of 14 000 women naval personnel and civilian employees in Australia reported harassment (Bridge, 1997). Forty percent of working women reported sexual harassment in Japan, varying from sexual jokes, comments about physical appearance or marital status, unwanted physical contact, lewd telephone calls and letters, demands for sex from senior colleagues or sexual attack (Human Rights Report, 1996; National Personnel Authority survey, 1998). The Mexican Federation of Women Trade Unions has reported that 95% of women workers have been sexually harassed (Carrillo, 1992). Twenty-seven percent of medical students in Taiwan reported being sexually harassed (Tang, 1999). In the USA one in 12 women and one in 45 men have been stalked at some time in their life (National Victim Center, 1999).

Religion and sex

Religion has a profound impact on many aspects of sex, from masturbation and adultery to homosexuality. In the UK the Church of England denied a homosexual the right to be godfather to his sister's son (Boycott, 1995). In Brazil a Catholic Bishop refused to marry a paraplegic man, because he would not be able to have sex and father children (*Sunday Morning Post*, 1996).

Despite homophobic attitudes from many religions, about two-thirds of homosexual, bisexual and transgender religious youth questioned in the USA agreed with the statement: 'I have no doubt that God loves me just as I am' (!Outproud!, 1998).

The future of sex

Sex is increasingly separated from reproduction, by test tube babies, surrogate mothers and cloning. The immediate future promises an era of more open attitudes and sexual practices. But this is nothing new. History has shown repeated cycles of liberalism and conservatism towards sex. However, for the first time, new

technology will introduce undreamed of possibilities in the sexual arena. The strength of personal and family relationships will be strongly tested by these new possibilities. The ultimate effects are unclear.

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