The Palgrave Handbook of Sexual Ethics, Ch. 27

Sexual Exclusion

Alida Liberman

1. **Introduction**

What does it mean to say that someone is sexually excluded? Should we attempt to remedy such exclusion, and if so, how? Sexual goods are often run together in academic and popular discussions of these questions, which leads to a lack of clarity at best and to unhelpful misunderstandings at worst. For there are many kinds of sexual goods, and exclusion from one kind of good does not entail exclusion from another. Consequently, individuals are harmed in distinct ways by exclusion from different kinds of sexual goods, and appropriate responses to such exclusion vary greatly.

In this chapter, I clarify this conceptual space by articulating several distinct kinds of sexual exclusion: (1) lack of access to sexual pleasure; (2) lack of partnered sex; and (3) lack of the social or psychological validation that comes from being seen as a sexual being. I investigate the nature of the harm associated with each kind of exclusion, and offer proposals about what our collective responses to these harms should be. In doing so, I situate discussion of these goods within the small but growing philosophical literature about sexual exclusion and inclusion, and weigh in on debates about whether there are rights to various kinds of sexual goods. I conclude that we ought to respond to sexual exclusion by providing mechanical assistance to those who are incapable of self-stimulation, enhancing access to sexual education for everyone, and engaging in a broad and systematic effort to change the harmful social norms, stereotypes, and cultural ideals that drive exclusion from partnered sex and that can lead those who are sexually excluded to feel socially invalidated.

1. **The Scope and Framing of the Problem**

Clarification about the scope and framing of the topic of sexual exclusion is in order before proceeding. First, discussions of sexual exclusion in the philosophical literature are most often about how to respond to the sexual exclusion of people with disabilities. This debate focuses on whether to give people whose disabilities lead to sexual exclusion special permission to purchase sex (in jurisdictions in which prostitution is otherwise illegal), and whether sexual facilitation services for disabled people should be publicly funded or provided via charitable organizations.[[1]](#endnote-1)

However, as I argue elsewhere,[[2]](#endnote-2) this narrow focus on sexual exclusion and disability is both unhelpful and potentially harmful. This is due to the fact that the potential solutions that authors address are remedies to the harms of *being sexually excluded* rather than remedies to any harms that stem directly or essentially from being disabled*.* For being disabled is neither necessary nor sufficient for being sexually excluded; there are many people without disabilities who are sexually excluded and many people with disabilities who are not. It is true that disability is a frequent cause of exclusion from partnered sex (and the social validation that comes it) in our ableist society. But narrowly focusing on disability status as the feature that merits a special right to sexual inclusion risks sending a false and harmful message that disability is necessarily a cause of sexual exclusion, while unhelpfully skirting around the core issue of sexual exclusion simpliciter. We should instead focus on sexual exclusion per se.

John Danaher takes up my call to focus directly on sexual exclusion, offering the first broad treatment of sexual inclusion in the analytic philosophy literature. He argues that sexual experiences should be treated as a distributive good and that sexual inclusion should be thought of “first and foremost in terms of distributive justice — i.e. as something to be addressed through principles and ideals of equality”,[[3]](#endnote-3) especially for those who are sexually excluded through unjust or unfair mechanisms (e.g., prejudice or discrimination). Treating sex as a distributive good does not automatically entail that there are any rights to sex, and Danaher emphasizes that individuals never have a positive right or entitlement to have sex with anyone. But he argues that “there are some compelling moral reasons to favour recognising a bundle of both positive and negative claim rights to sexual inclusion”,[[4]](#endnote-4) and suggests that candidate rights might include the removal of legal restrictions on sexual activities along with the provision of sexual education, mechanical sex aids or toys for those who cannot obtain them on their own, and (possibly) anti-discrimination training. Danaher then defends his view against four possible objections: that it upholds misogyny, that it is impossible or impracticable, that it contributes to the stigmatization of the sexually excluded, and that it involves problematic social engineering.

This chapter elaborates and expands on Danaher’s project by more thoroughly assessing what kinds of negative and positive sex rights exist and examining how we should foster sexual inclusion of various sorts even when there is no right to it. Danaher focuses on whether sexual exclusion is unjust, and frames the mechanisms of sexual exclusion in terms of the (potentially overlapping) reasons why one is excluded: (1) personal features of the excluded individual (such as shyness, awkwardness, excessive romantic idealism, or overly demanding standards for potential partners); (2) social features belonging to others (such as prejudicial attitudes against the excluded individual’s group, or laws and social norms that discourage or prohibit certain sexual behaviors in ways that impact the excluded individual); and possibly (3) natural “mechanisms of exclusion that result predominantly or exclusively from evolved instincts or drives that lead people to favour certain kinds of sexual partner or sexual experience over others.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

I adopt a different framing, and instead address what kinds of harms sexual exclusion leads to and what our responses to these harms should be. Accordingly, I focus not on the mechanisms of exclusion but on the different kinds of sexual goods from which one can be excluded. For the kind of good one is excluded from tracks more closely with questions about rights and rectification than do the personal or social features that lead to exclusion. Whether and how an instance of sexual exclusion ought to be remedied depends on what sort of sexual good is lacking, rather than on whether the exclusion is due to personal or social factors. I find part (3) of Danaher’s taxonomy especially unhelpful. As Danaher notes, the extent to which our sexual preferences are products of evolution—as well as the extent to which evolved preferences can be shaped or modified by culture or individual effort—is a complex empirical question for which the evidence is mixed. More importantly, whether an act of sexual exclusion is unjust does not depend on how it harms people and whether these harms can be remedied, and not on whether it is grounded in a preference that is “natural” or “social.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Finally, in arguing that important sexual goods exist and that exclusion from them can be harmful in ways that call out for collective and individual responses, I do not mean to assume that any particular sexual good is essential to any individual person’s well-being. Individuals who choose to be celibate for religious or other reasons can presumably lead flourishing lives, as can people who are asexual and accordingly feel neutral about or averse to engaging in solo or partnered sex.[[7]](#endnote-7)

1. **Exclusion from Solo Sexual Pleasure**

The most basic form of sexual exclusion is the inability to attain sexual pleasure simpliciter, by which I mean stimulation leading to sexual satisfaction. Individuals will vary greatly in both the degree of their motivation to seek pleasure and in what kinds of experiences they find pleasurable, and we should be broadly inclusive of what counts as sexual pleasure. However, for the sake of discussion I am ruling out sadistic pleasure that is inextricably bound up in another’s non-consensual pain or degradation, and am not counting this among the sexual goods from which one might be excluded.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Exclusion from solo sexual pleasure is the only sort of sexual exclusion that plausibly grounds any positive claim rights. I presume that if X is a very important good, then individuals have a prima facie positive right to obtain X. This claim is highly qualified: the “very” constraint restricts it to only those goods that are central to human flourishing, and the “prima facie” constraint accommodates the many ways in which even very important goods can be unattainable and thus not something to which we have a fulfillable right (e.g., if there is a limited quantity, or no way to provide them without infringing on others’ more important rights). Because solo sexual pleasure is a very important good that can be readily obtained without infringing on others’ rights, there is a positive right to solo sexual pleasure.

While there are religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions that denigrate sexual pleasure, or see it is as something to be managed or avoided rather than celebrated and sought after, in most secular contexts sexual pleasure is recognized as an important part of human flourishing. For example, it is a component of major philosophical theories of well-being. Hedonist theories will include sexual pleasure as one kind of intrinsically valuable pleasure. Desire-satisfaction theories of well-being will include sexual pleasure as a component of well-being so long as most individuals in fact desire it (and on some theories, would continue to desire it were they fully informed and rational). And objective list theories of well-being often include sexual pleasure on the list of objectively good things (whether as a distinct good, or more commonly, as a species of general pleasure). Sexual pleasure can also be understood as a component of physical and mental health, and the positive right to it subsumed under a right to receive what is necessary for good health. For example, the 2014 World Declaration of Sexual Rights includes the right to “the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual health; with the possibility of pleasurable, satisfying, and safe sexual experiences.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Thankfully, solo sexual pleasure is not a good for which there is a fixed quantity. Nor does the pursuit of it usually require infringing on others’ more important rights; so long as there is opportunity (and in some cases, access to education, assistive technology, or other forms of facilitation), sexual pleasure can be attained by oneself.[[10]](#endnote-10) Furthermore, feminist scholars and activists have long argued that framing sexual pleasure as an important good to which we have a right is important for egalitarian reasons. Women’s sexual pleasure is often undervalued compared with men’s, or is overlooked in sexual encounters with men. Acknowledging a positive right to sexual pleasure may help combat this trend.It follows that individuals have a prima facie, defeasible, positive right to experience solo sexual pleasure, to the extent that this is possible and desirable for them. This means that we have the right to acquire whatever tools, knowledge, and other resources are needed to enable the pursuit and attainment of sexual pleasure.

Exclusion from solo sexual pleasure can stem from multiple causes, which require different responses. These causes include (but are not limited to) (1) lacking the physical ability to masturbate; (2) lacking knowledge of sex and/or an understanding of one’s own sexuality; and (3) internalized cultural or religious shame or a history of trauma that hinders sexual functioning (independently of physical abilities). It is beyond my scope to address this third source of exclusion, which is better addressed by those with training in psychology and sexology. However, it is a source of exclusion from solo sexual pleasure that is clearly unjust and problematic, and those with relevant expertise should work to develop individual and collective strategies for responding to it.

* 1. ***Lack of physical ability and mechanical sexual assistance***

An inability to provide oneself with sexual pleasure can be caused by physical disabilities or medical conditions that make self-stimulation challenging or impossible. People who lack this ability have a pro tanto positive right to mechanical sexual assistance. Such assistance is on a par with other kinds of assistive services, and it should be provided for relevantly disabled people in whatever way healthcare and accessibility more generally is provided. Although I cannot argue for this claim at present, I assume that the state has a moral obligation to provide its citizens with comprehensive healthcare services, including meeting the accessibility needs of people with disabilities. If this is correct, it follows that mechanical sexual assistance ought to be state-funded as well. If this is not correct, then mechanical sexual assistance ought to be provided via private insurance schemes or whatever other means by which other healthcare services are provided.

Mechanical sexual assistance might involve specialized masturbation devices used by the excluded individual alone or with the assistance of a medical worker or caretaker. Adaptive technology exists to help people with disabilities move, cook, eat, engage in personal grooming, get dressed, use a computer, and more. Adaptive technologies might assist with sexual self-stimulation in a similar way.[[11]](#endnote-11) Mechanical sexual assistance might also include assisting with the mechanics of partnered sex, such as placing someone with limited mobility into a certain position, setting up specialized furniture,[[12]](#endnote-12) or assisting with putting on a condom.

In general, positive rights are limited insofar as they infringe on the rights of others, and the same is true of sexual rights.It follows that caretakers have a right to refuse to engage in sexual facilitation as part of their right to sexual liberty. Sexual behavior is considered especially intimate and private by many people in a way that other physical processes (such as bathing or using a toilet) are not. Moreover, the boundaries of what counts as participating in a sex act are not always clear, and certain types of sexual assistance might make the caretaker feel like they are personally involved in the sexual act or are themselves being treated as an object of sexual desire. No caretaker who does not wish to do so should be required or otherwise pressured to engage in sexual assistance.

Two solutions would enable excluded people to attain sexual pleasure without violating the sexual liberty rights of caretakers. First, caretakers could choose to join a registry of those willing to perform sexual assistance services. They might receive additional training in this area, and perhaps be entitled to additional compensation.[[13]](#endnote-13) There could also be specialized caretakers who provide this service by referral for clients whose usual caretakers are unwilling to do so.

Second, in the near future we might develop machines that can provide sexual pleasure without the involvement of another person. Existing sex “robots” are essentially interactive sex dolls. While they use artificial intelligence to engage in basic conversation with users and display facial reactions, they are fundamentally passive and are not able to proactively engage in any sexual behavior.[[14]](#endnote-14) More advanced sex robots might be developed that could provide sexual stimulation in a more autonomous way. This would be one way to satisfy the positive right to solo sexual pleasure without imposing on anyone else.[[15]](#endnote-15) However, we need to tread extremely cautiously in order to avoid two major potential problems with sex robots. First, we cannot presume (as many authors writing on the topic do) that a sufficiently advanced sex robot would not itself be a moral person or a bearer or rights.[[16]](#endnote-16) We must accordingly take great pains to monitor the moral status of such robots and to avoid potentially harming them or violating their rights.

Second, most current sex robots are designed to have compliant and controllable personalities, with unrealistic and highly exaggerated female bodies that are modeled on pornography and meant to appeal to a stereotypical male gaze. It is easy to imagine how their use might encourage or exacerbate the objectification and dehumanization of actual women.[[17]](#endnote-17) But sex robots that are constructed to provide solo sexual pleasure as a matter of rights satisfaction need not be sexist in these ways. They might be designed in a non-humanoid way to avoid contributing to women’s sexual objectification.[[18]](#endnote-18) Danaher suggests drawing on various models of sex-positive feminist pornography to think about how we might construct “feminist sexbots”—for example, by including more women in their design and production and building robots that are more diverse in their physical representations and behavioral scripts.[[19]](#endnote-19)

* 1. ***Lack of knowledge and provision of sexual education***

Lack of access to sexual pleasure can also stem from lack of knowledge, as pleasurable solo sex may not be available to individuals who do not have access to accurate and comprehensive information about how sexual pleasure works and the myriad ways in which human sexuality can be expressed. Lack of sex education can also lead to bad, dangerous, or frustrating partnered sex, which makes the moral imperative to provide comprehensive sex education overdetermined; people need knowledge both to pleasure themselves and to safely and ethically pursue the kinds of partnered sex that they desire. The current state of sex education in the United States is severely lacking.[[20]](#endnote-20) Twenty states do not require sex education to be provided at all. Only twenty states (and D.C.) require provision of information about contraception, and only nine states (and D.C.) require emphasizing the importance of consent. While eleven states (and D.C.) require the provision of inclusive content about sexual orientation, six states require that homosexuality be presented in only a negative light.Even people who receive comprehensive and inclusive sexual education in school are subjected to a myriad of false and harmful myths about sexual pleasure stemming from pornography, media, and popular culture. Women’s sexual pleasure is especially likely to be misunderstood, with the false assumption that most women can and should orgasm quickly through vaginal sex alone being among the most persistent and pernicious myths.[[21]](#endnote-21) LGBT+ people are especially likely to lack access to appropriate and adequate sex education,[[22]](#endnote-22) as are people with disabilities.[[23]](#endnote-23)

In general, we have a right to obtain the knowledge necessary for accessing the important goods to which we are entitled, as a corollary of our positive right to these goods. It follows that there is a positive right to receive adequate sexual education. This is endorsed by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to education in a 2010 report.[[24]](#endnote-24) While some parents provide their children with comprehensive sexual education, many others avoid the topic completely or teach their children false, restrictive, or harshly judgmental information. Sexual education should therefore be provided by the state via public schools, as well as free educational websites or printed materials accessible to those who do not attend public school or who are no longer enrolled in school. Special care should be taken to provide education for people whose sexualities are under-represented in popular media and mainstream discussions.

Whether parents should be permitted to exempt their young children from sexual education in public schools on religious or other grounds is a fraught question that is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is important that children are able to choose for themselves whether they wish to access sexual education when they are older; parents should not be able to exempt adolescents who do not wish to be exempted, or to prevent them from accessing educational materials on their own.

1. **Exclusion from Partnered Sex**

Most discussions of sexual exclusion focus on exclusion from partnered sex. Partnered sex is frequently connected to (and sometimes conflated with) the goods of intimacy, romance, and love. While these goods are extremely important, I am focusing only on partnered sex itself, and not on the other relational goods that it can facilitate. For partnered sex is plausibly a distinctive good even apart from these relational goods. It can provide pleasure of a different sort or degree than can solo sex; as Jacob Appel notes, “the act of physical contact with another human being appears to provide a degree of pleasure and fulfilment entirely distinct from mere masturbation, even when that contact lacks emotional intimacy”.[[25]](#endnote-25) Even apart from the ways in which partnered sex can bolster romance and emotional intimacy, it is frequently intertwined with other goods, such as taking pleasure in making others happy, enjoying being made happy by others, and the satisfaction of participating in a mutually beneficial project.

* 1. ***The negative right to pursue partnered sex***

Although partnered sex is an important good, there is no positive right (of even a prima facie sort) to receive partnered sex on demand or from any particular person. Such a right is unfulfillable: it would inevitably trample on others’ negative rights to bodily autonomy and self-determination, since any putative partner has the right to refuse. Appeals to such a right also display a morally indefensible sense of entitlement and disrespect for the sexual autonomy of others.

However, it is plausible that there are negative rights to pursue consensual partnered sex. This right may be overridden in cases that involve other types of serious harm.[[26]](#endnote-26) Possible examples include consensual incest (which risks harm to family structures and potential offspring) and consensual relationships where there are serious power differentials and/or conflicts of interest (e.g., between bosses and employees, faculty members and their students, therapists and their clients, politicians and lobbyists, etc.). If, as some feminists have argued, some or all forms of commercial sex are in fact seriously harmful—whether to sex workers themselves, or to women in general, or both—the negative right to buy or sell sex would be ruled out as well. Barring such cases, it is rights-violating and morally impermissible to enact policies or laws that prohibit individuals from pursuing non-harmful sex in private with consenting partners.

Obvious violations of the negative right to pursue partnered sex include laws that restrict sexual activity on the basis of race, sex, gender, religion, ethnicity, caste or class, and the like. Less obvious violations include policies against sex in assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and other residential institutions. While most institutions lack formal policies about sexual behavior between residents, many informally prohibit or discourage residents from engaging in consensual sex with each other, including by displaying negative and patronizing attitudes, depriving residents of privacy (e.g., with unlocked door policies and regular room checks), and deferring to the preferences of a resident’s family about whether sexual behavior should be permitted.[[27]](#endnote-27) Such policies are rights-violating and accordingly should not be permitted, unless they are needed to prevent serious harm or abuse. (For example, there are complicated and important questions about whether people with dementia or certain forms of intellectual disability have the capacity to genuinely consent to sex, which I cannot answer here.)

Similar questions arise for young adults living in residential schools and colleges. Some private institutions (such as conservative Christian colleges) prohibit students from engaging in partnered sex as part of their codes of conduct. However, this is presumably morally permissible so long as students voluntarily undertake these restrictions (e.g., they know about them when they enroll) and are able to escape from them if they so choose (e.g., they’re permitted to quit or transfer if they want to). A trickier question is whether boarding schools for high school students should prohibit students from engaging in consensual partnered sex. Students who are not legal adults may not have voluntarily accepted these restrictions, as their parents may be determining which school they attend. But if the potential for coercion or abuse is high enough, this could justify putting restrictions in place.

Even trickier is the question of whether it is morally permissible for prisons to prohibit consensual sex between inmates. Many U.S. prisons forbid inmates from engaging in masturbation,[[28]](#endnote-28) and sex between inmates is illegal in all U.S. states and federal prisons. (Sex between inmates and guards is also illegal, and rightfully so, as the potential for power abuses is very likely to lead to serious harm.) All else being equal, inmates should be permitted to pursue both solo sexual pleasure and consensual partnered sex, and policies forbidding this are problematically rights-violating. However, all else is likely not equal, as rates of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual coercion in jails and prisons are very high. Prison dynamics can also make it challenging to know whether sex is truly consensual, while a strong prohibition against “snitching” strongly discourages reporting violations. Whether these harms are serious enough to merit restricting inmates’ right to pursue partnered sex is a complicated empirical and normative question worth further investigation.

* 1. ***Fostering inclusion in partnered sex***

Not everyone who has the right to pursue partnered sex will be able to successfully find a partner, for a variety of reasons. Geographic remoteness might limit access to suitable partners. Social anxiety might make it challenging to connect with new people. And our cultural standards of sexual desirability strongly prioritize people who are young, light-skinned, thin (for women) or muscular (for men), cisgender, non-disabled, and conventionally attractive, which can make it more challenging for people who do not fit these categories to find partners.As Don Kulick and Jens Rydstöm note, “lots of people, many of whom have no physical or intellectual impairments to speak of at all, are hindered in their search for erotic fulfilment and love by other people’s prejudices, their own insecurities, and by their lack of access (because they are the wrong race, age, class, etc.) to social arenas where they conceivably might meet an erotic partner.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

Because partnered sex is an important good, and exclusion from it can be very painful, it would be better if more people who desired sex partners were able to find them. In light of this, we should think about how we might foster greater sexual inclusion. A crucial constraint in doing so is avoiding dangerous rhetoric about sexual entitlement. A small sub-set of men who are unable to find a sex partner identify as “incels” or “involuntary celibates” in online forums where they commiserate and complain about the fact that they are not having sex.[[30]](#endnote-30) Their posts range from sad and sincere confessions of loneliness to overtly misogynistic tirades. A recurrent theme among incels is a fierce anger—frequently accompanied by moralized resentment and sometimes by disgust—at women whom they perceive as causing their unhappiness by withholding sex from them. Discussion posts on incel forums are frequently sexist (e.g., categorizing women into hierarchies based on sexual desirability, engaging in slut-shaming) and dehumanizing (e.g., referring to women as “femoids” (short for “female humanoids”), using racial slurs).[[31]](#endnote-31) They also contain morally horrific proposals about how to respond to sexual exclusion, including legalizing rape and “redistributing” sex through cash incentives or state-funded prostitution.[[32]](#endnote-32) These ideas sometimes legitimize or encourage real-world violence (as with the killing sprees of Elliot Rodger in 2014 and Alek Minassian in 2018).[[33]](#endnote-33)

How can we respond to exclusion from partnered sex in ways that do not lend any fuel or credibility to these sorts of narratives? One simple strategy is to develop tools that enable people who are sexually excluded due to common prejudices or conventional beauty and body norms to find each other. Dozens of specialty dating apps exist to help people with niche interests, needs, and preferences find each other, as do in-person dating clubs and groups.[[34]](#endnote-34) A more challenging—but also potentially more fruitful—strategy is to think about how we should critically investigate our own sexual preferences and the cultural scripts that cement them, with the aim of potentially encouraging ourselves and others to be more open-minded or inclusive in who counts as a viable sexual partner.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Amia Srinivasan articulates the importance (and risks) of such a project in a powerful and incisive essay. She argues that even though sex is clearly not a good of the sort that can or should be redistributed, and there is no positive right to sex, we can still ask questions about whether our existing sexual preferences are fair or just:

Yet simply to say to a trans woman, or a disabled woman, or an Asian man, ‘No one is required to have sex with you,’ is to skate over something crucial. There is no entitlement to sex, and everyone is entitled to want what they want, but personal preferences—NO DICKS, NO FEMS, NO FATS, NO BLACKS, NO ARABS, NO RICE NO SPICE, MASC-FOR-MASC—are never just personal.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Srinivasan suggests that we move away from an uncritical sex-positivity that focuses exclusively on consent without ever scrutinizing whether our preferences are grounded in problematic stereotypes or discriminatory attitudes:

Consider the supreme fuckability of ‘hot blonde sluts’ and East Asian women, the comparative unfuckability of black women and Asian men, the fetishisation and fear of black male sexuality, the sexual disgust expressed towards disabled, trans and fat bodies. These too are political facts, which a truly intersectional feminism should demand that we take seriously.… [T]he sex-positive gaze risks covering not only for misogyny, but for racism, ableism, transphobia, and every other oppressive system that makes its way into the bedroom through the seemingly innocuous mechanism of ‘personal preference’.”

How might we do this? One starting point is engaging in personal reflection about what your own sexual preferences are and why you hold them. Do your preferences reflect the oppressive systems that shape our broader social attitudes? If you use dating apps, are you setting the parameters of who your potential partners are so narrowly that you’re excluding people you might be compatible with, perhaps on explicitly or implicitly biased grounds? Although fully assessing the empirical data about how our sexual preferences are formed and the extent to which they are mutable is beyond the scope of this chapter, there is reason to think that it might be possible to broaden our sexual horizons through wider exposure to more kinds of people and cultivating an attitude of open-mindedness.[[37]](#endnote-37) We should also think about how the media we consume frames sex, sexuality, and desire, and consider deliberately consuming a more diverse range of stories and perspectives. As Danaher puts it in his argument for greater sexual inclusion, this “doesn’t mean forcing people into sexual encounters against their will, but it does mean encouraging them to take a more critical, reflective attitude toward their own sexual psyches and not treating them as sacred, axiomatic truths.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

* 1. ***How not to foster inclusion in partnered sex***

Crucially, we should not be engaging in any sort of attempt to force people to change their sexual preferences (e.g., through brainwashing or “conversion therapy”), to shame or marginalize people for the preferences that they have, or to demand that people be attracted to those to whom they are not attracted. Practically speaking, such approaches are unlikely to succeed at fostering greater sexual inclusion. More importantly, they are ethically problematic; they violate liberty and sexual autonomy and risk unfairly criticizing people for things that are beyond their direct control. We also want to be on guard against encouraging fetishization; the line between choosing a sex partner of another race or “type” because you’re open to expanding your preferences and choosing a sex partner of another race or “type” because you are exoticizing them and making false or stereotypical assumptions about them can be a thin one.

Fostering sexual inclusion by changing underlying cultural norms and beauty ideals is likely to be a long-term, slow-moving project with no guarantee of success. There are, however, two ways to immediately increase access to partnered sex for excluded people in the short term that I believe we should reject. First is the proposal that excluded people attempt to change something about themselves so that their bodies are more in line with dominant norms of sexual attractiveness. Danaher argues that

In general, if someone has a body shape/property that is widely (though not absolutely) perceived as sexually unattractive there will be three things we can do to address their sexual exclusion: (i) we can do something to modify their body shape or property; (ii) we can match them to those who find their body shape attractive (or give them access to other outlets for sexual expression that are non-partnered, e.g., sex toys and so on); or (iii) we can try to change societal preferences to make them more sexually included.[[39]](#endnote-39)  
Options (ii) and (iii) are in line with what I have been suggesting. Danaher states that these strategies are most likely to be just, as they do not “compound the injustice done to an already marginalized/excluded population by making the problem something that they need to ‘fix’”; however, he argues that (i) is sometimes justified “due to reasons of cost-effectiveness or triviality, consent, and the fact that other moral ends are satisfied in the process.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Danaher offers an example of an obese man whose body size entails that he cannot find a sex partner, arguing that the facilitation of sexual inclusion could be part of the justification (along with promoting personal health or wellbeing) for providing him with gastric bypass surgery for weight loss.

I disagree that advocating for permanent body modification is a morally appropriate way to attempt to increase access to partnered sex. This is most obvious for serious and potentially dangerous interventions such as gastric bypass surgery, which rearranges the internal organs, requires life-long highly restrictive changes to eating habits, and carries a high risk of serious side effects.[[41]](#endnote-41) To justify such a surgery by pointing out that it will bring someone’s body more in line with narrow mainstream standards of sexual attractiveness is to give these standards a great amount of power. And encouraging another person to undertake *any* bodily change—even a comparatively safe and low-cost modification—in order to increase their access to partnered sex is to at least tacitly defer to or support these standards. Doing so implies that there is some problem with the excluded person, rather than locating the real source of the problem in the exclusionary and harmful standards to which the person does not adhere.[[42]](#endnote-42) If a feature that contributes to sexual exclusion *also* hinders someone’s flourishing independently of how others react to them, it makes sense to encourage them to attempt to alter that feature. But I presume that not meeting restrictive mainstream beauty standards is not *intrinsically* damaging to one’s flourishing, and is harmful only because of others’ discriminatory attitudes and behavior in light of these standards.

Although I think that advocating for individuals to change themselves to better conform to arbitrary and exclusionary social norms is generally ethically problematic, I also think that we should refrain from blaming or criticizing people who engage in such attempts. It will often be prudentially justified for someone who runs afoul of unjust standards to change themselves to better fit those standards. And it is not fair to blame marginalized or excluded individuals for making their own lives better by ascending a problematic hierarchy, even if this does nothing to dismantle (and perhaps further entrenches) the hierarchy itself. We should also recognize that there are many types of changes to bodies and behaviors that people might pursue in an effort to attract sexual partners, from applying makeup, to women feigning incompetence to appear unthreatening or men feigning aggressiveness to appear confident, to getting extensive cosmetic surgery.[[43]](#endnote-43) Not all such efforts will contribute equally to upholding restrictive beauty ideals or sexist gender norms, and it will be challenging to determine which types of modifications sustain such problematic norms.

The second problematic way to foster immediate sexual inclusion is granting special rights to people who are sexually excluded to purchase sex, in virtue of their excluded status. (As argued in Section 2, the right way to approach this proposal is by focusing on sexual exclusion per se, and not on features that are sometimes correlated with sexual exclusion, such as disability status.)Putting this proposal into practice would require us address messy, morally fraught, and likely impossible-to-answer questions about who is “really” sexually excluded. Is someone excluded from partnered sex only if they cannot find *any* partners, or if they cannot find partners that they find personally appealing? If the latter, does it matter how unrealistic or discriminatory their standards for a partner are? What if a heterosexual man cannot find a partner because he behaves in misogynistic ways that are off-putting to all the women he encounters? Does it matter if someone is proactively trying to find a partner, and if not, whether their lack of effort stems from restrictive gender norms (e.g., demanding that women refrain from making the first move) or laziness?

Nor should we side-step these questions by granting access to commercial sex to everyone on the grounds that this enables those who are sexually excluded to find partners. In our current cultural environment, most sellers of sex are women and most purchasers are men. Many women who sell sex must present themselves in ways that cater to the male gaze to attract clients. They must also frequently simulate the non-purchasable goods of romantic intimacy and sexual validation, since this is what clients are often seeking. Given this, legalizing commercial sex *because* it enables people who are sexually excluded to engage in partnered sex risks further entrenching false and damaging messages about male entitlement to sex with compliant, appealing women.

I am not suggesting that commercial sex alwayssends a problematic social message or supports male entitlement to sex. I find it plausible that at least some forms of commercial sex are morally permissible, and that commercial sex should be legally permitted (although assessing this claim in detail is beyond the scope of this chapter.) But this is for independent reasons having to do with sexual autonomy (and perhaps, in the case of legalization, with harm reduction), rather than as a remedy for sexual exclusion. When justified as a matter of exercising sexual liberty, commercial sex conveys the message that all people should be free to pursue their negative rights to engage in consensual sexual interactions. A harmful social message arises only when the justification for this is the sexually excluded status of the client, and when sexually excluded clients are overwhelmingly men purchasing sex from women who must cater to their whims. This sends the message that partnered sex is so important for men they are entitled to a special right to purchase it if they cannot get it elsewhere—not as a matter of liberty, but simply *because they cannot get it elsewhere.*

The same concerns presumably do not rule out surrogate partner therapy (or SPT, also sometimes called “sexual surrogacy”). In SPT, a client works under the direction of a licensed therapist with a surrogate partner who “participates with the client in structured and unstructured experiences that are designed to build client self-awareness and skills in the areas of physical and emotional intimacy.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Contra sometimes sensationalized coverage in news media, surrogates focus on helping clients learn “how to develop healthy relationships, how to touch and to receive touch, and how to be more accepting of one’s body and sexuality”; “genital-genital contact may or may not be therapeutically indicated” and is “often a minor part of the therapy.”[[45]](#endnote-45) The aim of SPT is teaching better sexual functioning that might enable the client to be less excluded in the long-term, rather than simply providing an excluded client with a sex partner. So long as SPT does not convey a sense of male entitlement to sex—and whether it risks doing so is a complex empirical question—it should be legal and de-stigmatized as a way to promote holistic sexual health and well-being.[[46]](#endnote-46)

1. **Exclusion from Sexual Validation**

The final form of exclusion that I will address is not a direct exclusion from a sexual good but an indirect negative consequence of such exclusion. Given deeply problematic background assumptions about the nature and importance of sex and about masculinity and femininity, being excluded from partnered sex can potentially lead to social stigma or feelings of personal invalidation in at least three ways.

First, adults—especially men—who have not experienced sexual intercourse (and who are not choosing celibacy for religious or other principled reasons) are often seen as pathetic or sad.In surveys of college students, male virgins report higher rates of negative emotions like anxiety, guilt, or embarrassment than do female virgins.[[47]](#endnote-47) Men are also more likely to view virginity in a stigmatizing way and to see “their status as virgins as something negative and embarrassing that they needed to shed as soon as possible.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Men’s lack of sexual experience confers lack of social status because we tend to assess masculinity in part in terms of how much (or how little) sex someone has had; unsurprisingly, stigmatizing beliefs about male virginity are positively correlated with beliefs in traditional gender roles and sexual double standards.[[49]](#endnote-49) While male virginity is mocked in comedy films like *The 40-Year Old Virgin,* 40-year old virgin women are erased from the cultural landscape, even as many young women are simultaneously told that their moral worth lies in their status as “pure” virgins.[[50]](#endnote-50) Sexually excluded women who try to find support online are shunned from most incel forums and other male-dominated support groups, whose members have little sympathy for the reasons why women might be excluded from partnered sex, insisting that any woman who struggles to find a sex partner simply has too-high standards.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Second, our cultural conception of what counts as “real” sex is narrowly focused on male ejaculation during heterosexual intercourse, which can stigmatize or invalidate people who express their sexuality in other ways. Most obviously, this completely excludes lesbian sex from counting as “real,” and erases the myriad of sexual encounters that do not involve penises penetrating vaginas. Marilyn Frye discusses how the framing of “having sex” in discrete, countable instances is a phallocentric concept that is not applicable to lesbian sex, since it implicitly assumes that male orgasm is the act that “counts” as having “had sex.”[[52]](#endnote-52) This narrow conception of what “counts” as sex also excludes men who cannot sustain erections (e.g., due to spinal cord injuries). For example, the documentary *Sex on Wheels* profiles Carl, a 32-year-old man who became paralyzed from the waist down in an accident. Carl had a very active sex life before the accident, and is unable to have an erection afterwards. Carl assumes that his sex life is over until he visits a therapist who specializes in non-genital routes to sexual fulfilment. Carl is skeptical at first, stating, “I want my hard-on back,” because the “most important tool in my box has been stolen.” However, after visiting a “sacred sexual healer” who engages in skin-to-skin contact and erotic massage that is not focused on the penis, Carl becomes optimistic that he can have a fulfilling sexual life without an erection.

Third, engaging in sexual activity is often seen as an essential mark of adulthood, and people who lack sexual experience are sometimes invalidated by being infantilized. For example, Mark O’Brien, a writer with polio whose essay about hiring Cheryl Cohen-Greene for SPT inspired the movie *The Sessions,* grew up in a conservative family that never discussed sex. After he loses his virginity to Cheryl, he feels emboldened to talk to his personal attendant about sex for the first time, and subsequently feels “admitted to something from which [he] had always felt excluded: the world of adults.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Similarly, *Sex On Wheels* profiles a woman who hires a sex worker to help her 26-year-old intellectually disabled son lose his virginity. Anticipating the event, she asks her son: “Are you happy, John? Are you going to be a man?” At first, John responds “I am a man; I’ve been a man since I was 18.” However, after John has sex for the first time, the sex worker reports that he “tells me he feels like a proper man now.” Similarly, in a survey about the attitudes of women with intellectual disabilities towards sex, researchers noted that “many of the participants did not identify themselves as women. They identified themselves as girls. One woman said she felt like a ‘grown teenager’, even though she was 56 years old.”[[54]](#endnote-54) In all of these cases, being sexually active seems to be a problematic prerequisite for being treated as an adult.

* 1. ***Responses to sexual invalidation***

The proper response to exclusion from sexual pleasure and partnered sex is to attempt to increase access to these goods. But the proper response to sexual invalidation is not to try to provide more people with such validation, for validation of this sort is not a good worth pursuing (let alone something that anyone has a right to). The norms that form the basis for sexual validation constitute a harmful and patriarchal constraint on our flourishing. Lack of sexual experience confers lack of social status on men only because of the problematic way our society assesses both masculinity and adulthood in terms of how much (or little) sex someone has had, and presumes that “real” sex can only involve a penis penetrating a vagina. Being denied such social status is indeed painful. However, we should attempt to remedy this pain not by helping sexually invalidated men to have normative sexual experiences—thereby upholding the pernicious norms that generate their pain in the first place—but by attempting to remove the stigma associated with lacking sexual experience or having non-normative sexual experiences.

As with the project of critically assessing and potentially expanding the horizons of sexual desirability, removing this stigma is likely to be a long-term, slow-moving project without any guarantee of success. How might this be done? For starters, we could advocate for a broader range of depictions of sexual inexperience in popular culture, and think twice about how we are framing discussions about sexual inexperience in our dating app profiles or in conversations with our friends. We should rethink the underlying gender norms that sustain the idea that men are valuable insofar as they display sexual prowess. And we should work to acknowledge the value and importance of friendships and other non-sexual relationships, and to recognize that while partnered sex is an important good, it is far from the *only* important good.[[55]](#endnote-55)

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1. Appel 2010 assumes that there is a right to sexual pleasure in the form of “mutual contact, not merely self-stimulation” (152) and advocates on this basis for an exemption to the prohibition of prostitution for disabled clients, proposing that these services (construed as “sexual surrogacy”) be publicly funded. I offer a critique of Appel’s rights-based argument in Liberman 2018. Di Nucci denies a positive right to sex, as “universal positive sexual rights are incompatible with universal negative sexual rights” (2011: 159); he proposes instead that “the sexual interests and needs of the severely disabled be met by charitable non-profit organisations whose members would voluntarily and freely provide sexual pleasure to the severely disabled” (2011: 158) or (in a later paper) by sophisticated sex robots (2018). Thomsen 2015 also argues for a legal exemption to the prohibition of prostitution, but on the grounds of beneficence and luck egalitarianism rather than on the basis of rights. By contrast, Jeffreys 2008 raises a feminist critique of the proposal that disabled people be permitted to purchase sex to avoid sexual exclusion on the grounds that this promotes a deeply problematic vision of male sexuality that oppresses and dominates women. Tracy de Boer 2015 replies that disabled men who purchase sex are in many cases “seeking the goods of sex, such as intimacy, connection, and sexual inclusion, as opposed to male domination” (66). See also Marino 2019: Ch. 11 for an excellent overview of philosophical perspectives on sex, love, and disability. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Liberman 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Danaher 2020: 476 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *ibid* 477 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *ibid* 473 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Assuming that morality cannot demand the impossible of us, the existence of firm and unchangeable limits on our sexual desires—whether resulting from evolution, social conditioning, or a combination of both—would entail that we cannot be obligated as a matter of justice to desire any particular individual or type of individual. However, demanding that someone desire another violates their sexual autonomy and is morally inappropriate on independent grounds, even if such desires are possible. For this reason, the remedies to sexual exclusion that I will address are at the level of social policy, and do not require that any individual change any particular desire. See also Section 4.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Experiences of asexuality vary. Some people who identify as asexual—understood as experiencing little to no sexual attraction—experience sexual desire and will masturbate or have partnered sex, while others do not. Similarly, some (although not all) people who are asexual experience romantic (as distinct from sexual) attraction. While asexuality per sedoes not hinder flourishing or well-being, discrimination against or misunderstanding of asexual people may lead to decreases in well-being (as with other non-normative sexual orientations). See Carrigan 2015; see also the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (<https://www.asexuality.org/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In doing so, I remain neutral about whether sadistic pleasure counts as a kind of valuable pleasure in its own right or whether the sadism defeats or undermines the value of the pleasure. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Declaration was first proclaimed by the World Association for Sexual Health (an umbrella organization representing over 100 national and international sexological organizations) in 1997 and updated in 2014. What the right to sexual health consists in is framed vaguely, as requiring “the availability, accessibility, acceptability of quality health services and access to the conditions that influence and determine health including sexual health.” See <https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Declaration-of-Sexual-Rights-2014-plain-text.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. An exception to this is sexual pleasure-seeking that violates the rights of others to avoid witnessing sexual situations without consent, such as public masturbation, to which there is no positive right. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Assistive masturbation devices include “vibrating cushions, remotely controlled masturbation devices, and vibrators with long handles for people who could not otherwise reach” (Quarmby 2015, citing Owens and de Than 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For example, see the furniture available at [www.intimaterider.com](http://www.intimaterider.com). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For this to be truly non-coercive, however, the base pay would have to be a living wage, and social services would have to meet workers’ basic needs. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Sharkey et al. 2017 for an overview of what current sex robots are like. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For an argument to this effect, see Di Nucci 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In a review of an anthology on robot sex (Danaher and McArthur, eds. 2017), Marcus Arvan 2019 worries about the fact that most of the volume’s contributors presume without argument that sex robots are mere objects and are not persons. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Kathleen Richardson’s feminist Campaign Against Sex Robots (<https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/>), along with Richardson 2016. See Danaher 2017 for an account of the possible negative symbolic consequences of using sex robots, and a proposal that these consequences be carefully assessed via an experimental approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A challenge with this proposal is that people’s sexual desires may themselves be sexist, and a non-humanoid robot that provided sexual stimulation may not satisfy these desires. The proposals I make in Sections 4.2 about eventual re-assessment of cultural standards of sexual desirability might do something to alleviate this concern in the long-term, although I am not optimistic that this is very likely. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Danaher 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education> for an overview of current regulations by state. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Nagoski 2015 for a dismantling of common myths about women’s sexuality, including the idea that physiological arousal (i.e., genital lubrication) and subjective sexual arousal (i.e., feeling turned on) always occur together when in many cases they do not, and the idea that “proper” sexual desire is spontaneous when many women primarily experience responsive desire in reaction to ongoing sexual stimuli. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. A 2019 school climate survey from GLSEN found that only 8.2% of American students reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education. See <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/NSCS-2019-Full-Report_0.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. People with disabilities are often completely sheltered from learning about sex and sexuality. This might be from a misguided sense of paternalism, because caretakers do not want or know how to deal with the reality of disabled people’s sexual lives, or because disabled people are falsely presumed to be asexual or incapable of having sex. For example, Tim Rose, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, reports that in high school he “used to get sent out for sex education classes all the time, because it was seen as, ‘Tim, you don’t need to know this stuff’” (Verstraten 2015). Medical professionals are also sometimes hesitant to provide sexual education. For example, a 20-year-old woman reports that when she was using a wheelchair, “even my doctors were hesitant to talk about my reproductive health or contraceptives when ‘I had so many other things to worry about’” (Hills 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Munoz 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Appel 2010: 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See Liberman 2018 for further discussion of this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Frankowski and Clark 2009 for a discussion of “the realities of sex and intimacy in assisted living from the perspectives of residents, families, managers, and staff, exploring the discourse of sexuality, the impact of institutional structure and the role of oversight on sexual attitudes and behaviors, and the relationship of assisted living industry values to residents’ sexual expression” (25). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Prison overcrowding means that many prisoners lack privacy, and “public” masturbation in prison can result in anything from fines to loss of commissary privileges to being sent to solitary confinement; see Dold 2017. A major potential source of harm (which could, if serious enough, justify restricting the prima facie positive right to pursue sexual pleasure) is the way in which male inmates engage in “exhibitionist” masturbation in the presence of female guards as a form of sexual harassment; see Patterson 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kulick and Rydstöm 2015: 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See Ging 2019 for an overview of the broader online “manosphere” of which incels are a part. Incel forums have flourished on sites like 4chan, 8chan, and incels.co. Reddit banned its most prominent incel forum (r/incels) in 2017 under a policy forbidding content that glorifies or encourages violence; the incel subreddit that replaced it (r/braincels) was banned in 2019 for violating Reddit’s harassment policy. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For a list of terminology, see the glossary from incels.wiki (<https://incels.wiki/w/Incel_Forums_Term_Glossary>) as well as <https://www.timsquirrell.com/blog/2018/5/30/a-definitive-guide-to-incels-part-two-the-blackpill-and-vocabulary>. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. On April 26 2018, economist Robin Hanson posted a blog entry about the redistribution of sex in response to Minassian’s “incel revolution” van attack a few days earlier, stating that “one might plausibly argue that those with much less access to sex suffer to a similar degree as those with low income, and might similarly hope to gain from organizing around this identity, to lobby for redistribution along this axis and to at least implicitly threaten violence if their demands are not met”; he noted as an aside that “sex could be directly redistributed, or cash might be redistributed in compensation.” (<https://www.overcomingbias.com/2018/04/two-types-of-envy.html>). The post reached a wide audience after Ross Douthat discussed it in a column in *The New York Times* on May 2 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/opinion/incels-sex-robots-redistribution.html>), and was met with a wave of criticism. See also the incel notion of “sexual Marxism” <https://incels.wiki/w/Sexual_Marxism>.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. In 2014, Elliot Rodger uploaded a video to YouTube decrying his status as a virgin and threatening to punish women for the “crime” of not being attracted to him; he subsequently killed six people, wounded fourteen, and took his own life. In 2018, Alek Minassian posted on Facebook that “The Incel Rebellion has already begun!”, praised Elliot Rodger, and drove his van into a crowd in Toronto, killing ten and injuring sixteen. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. For example, the Outsiders Club in the U.K. is “peer support and dating club, run by and for socially and physically disabled people” (<https://www.outsiders.org.uk/outsidersclub/>), while the 50plus-club hosts in-person and online meet-ups for older singles around the U.S. (<https://www.50plus-club.com/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See O’Shea forthcoming for an argument that “there are injustices in the distribution and character of our sexual desires and that we can be held responsible for correcting these injustices” (24). O’Shea focuses on collective, political, structural solutions rather than individual responses, including “making changes to the architecture of online dating, removing unnecessary legal obstacles to sexual intimacy, and ensuring that institutional and urban design pays sufficient attention to social mixing” (25). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Srinivasan 2018. For further discussion of ethical problems with racialized sexual and romantic preferences, see Marino 2019: Ch. 10, Mitchell and Wells 2018, Zheng 2016, Bedi 2015, and Coleman 2011. For an argument that racialized sexual preferences need not be racist, see Halwani 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. There is some empirical evidence that body size preferences can shift in response to media exposure—for example, rural Nicaraguans who had no exposure to television preferred larger body sizes than those who were exposed to television (Boothroyd et al. 2016). See also Season 5, Episode 5 of the podcast *Invisibilia* (“A Very Offensive Rom-Com”), in which “L” realizes that she has strong racial preferences in dating, and embarks on a deliberate “experiment” to attempt to shift these preferences (<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/04/709948132/a-very-offensive-rom-com>); the link contains a list of scientific research about how human sexual desires (including racial preferences) are conditioned. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Danaher 2020: 491 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *ibid.*: 474 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. This is not to claim that procedures like gastric bypass should never be performed; whether the surgery offers net benefits in a particular case is a complex question that will depend on both empirical data about expected health effects as well as personal value judgments. I am arguing simply that it is morally problematic to advocate that others undergo gastric bypass *as a remedy* for sexual exclusion. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. I presume that the harmfulness of these standards does not depend on their ultimate source—that is, whether they are the product of mere convention, evolution, or a mixture of both. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. See <https://www.thecut.com/2019/05/incel-plastic-surgery.html/> for a story about self-identified incels (some of whom seem to have severe body dysmorphia) who pursue extensive plastic surgery in an attempt to turn themselves into sexually desirable alpha males or “Chads.” [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. International Professional Surrogates Association, “Surrogate Partner Therapy”: <https://www.surrogatetherapy.org/what-is-surrogate-partner-therapy/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. See Mintz 2014 for an argument defending SPT as a legitimate healthcare treatment for people with severe disabilities in a fair equality of opportunity framework. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See Sprecher and Regan 1996 and Sprecher and Treger 2015. Although virginity is a social construct without a clear medical definition, for ease of discussion I follow the common convention of using “virgin” to mean “someone who has not had penetrative intercourse.” See Valenti 2010 for discussion of the ways in which conceptualizing virginity in this way is problematic. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Eriksson and Humphreys 2014: 108; see also Carpenter 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Eriksson and Humphreys 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Valenti 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. See Chester 2018. Ironically, the term “incel” originates with a website started by a queer woman named Alana in 1993 as a support group for people who were struggling to find romantic connection. Alana left the site after a few years, and did not know that the term had sparked a misogynistic internet sub-culture until she read about Elliot Rodger’s 2014 killing spree. See episode 120 of the podcast *Reply All* (<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/76h59o/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Frye 1988. The presumption that sex must involve penile-vaginal penetration is so strong that someone who regularly engages in both oral and anal sex describes herself a virgin in the following interview: <https://www.thehairpin.com/2013/01/interview-with-a-virgin-scarlet/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. O’Brien 1990: 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Fitzgerald and Withers 2011: 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. ### Thanks to David Boonin, Josh Crabill, and Raja Halwani for helpful commentary on this paper. Thanks also to Veromi Arsiradam, Nicole Fice, Carolyn McLeod, Emma Ryman, and Megan Winsby for feedback on earlier work that inspired this paper.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-55)