NOT IN THE MOOD CLUB
Why We Sometimes Just Don’t Want Sex

by Maria Popov

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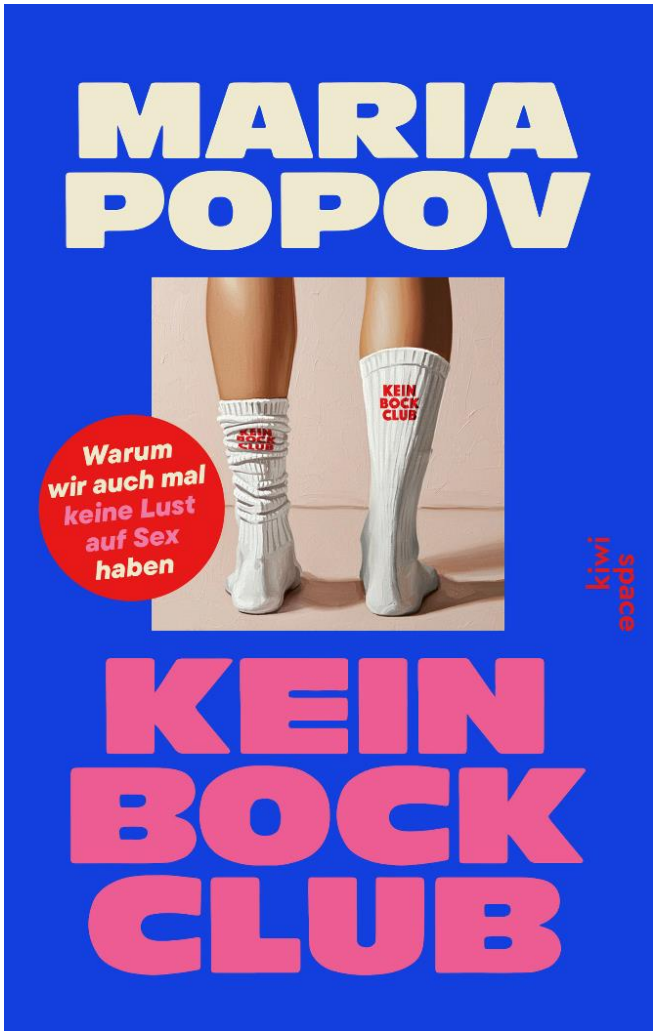

Non-Fiction, 320 pages
Publication date: October 2025
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6. Feminism Is in the Mood

For a TikTok trend in 2020, people lip-synced to a viral sound. The videos usually featured a young woman in front of her selfie camera. A deep voice from off-screen said: ‘Please rise for our national anthem.’ Then Cardi B sang: ‘Now get a bucket and a mop, that’s some wet-ass pussy. I’m talkin’ wap, wap, wap, that’s some wet-ass pussy.’ When I saw the videos for Cardi B’s song *WAP* for the first time, my jaw dropped. What lyrics! The anthem of a generation. There I sat, newly aware that I was asexual, feeling strange. So who – or what – was I now? An asexual feminist? A sex-positive person who doesn’t find sex all that positive?

It felt like I was standing in the middle of a hungry crowd in front of a table heaped with food. The air was filled with the scent of freshly baked bread and unfamiliar spices. A woman next to me greedily eyed the food, beads of sweat already shining on her forehead. A man on the other side drummed his fingers impatiently on his empty plate, muttering about how the countdown was way too slow. Everyone was waiting with bated breath for the signal to start eating. And me? I just stood there with an empty plate – not hungry, without desire – wondering if I was being ungrateful. Wasn’t this exactly what feminists in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s had fought for: the separation of love and sex, the de-stigmatisation of desire, the liberation from patriarchal prudery? And if, despite

that freedom, you weren't hungry, had no desire for sex – then something must be wrong with you, right?

The feminist literature I read in my twenties told me that women should be sex-positive and take whatever they wanted: dicks, sex toys, and compensation for unpaid care work. But my own existence was nowhere to be found in these discourses – nor in the queer-feminist spaces that promised me so much strength, solidarity, and understanding. Sometimes I felt like I didn't belong – especially when I spoke about my experiences as a 32-year-old,asexual, lesbian feminist with a migrant background. The discourse in my head turned 'You *can* have sex and take what you want' into 'I *must* have sex and desire.' Freedom and self-determination became imperatives that were imposed on me.

When I started my first big job at the feminist talk show, I sometimes felt like I was in just the right place – and other times like the biggest impostor. I hosted videos, interviewed inspiring people, and wrote scripts on sex education. We produced episodes about masturbation and the differences between good and bad sex. I spoke about these topics with apparent ease, but inside, I was plagued by insecurity. It felt like a lie – like I was an imposter – when I called myself sex-positive, even as I privately struggled with the hype surrounding sex. Videos with me on the cover and the word 'sex' in the title racked up millions of views, while I was racked with millions of doubts.

As a queer public figure, I explained on talk shows what the acronym LGBTQIA+ stands for. I highlighted the existence of asexuality – but stayed silent about why I knew so much about it. I preferred calling myself queer rather than lesbian, and lesbian rather than ever identifying as asexual. I kept brushing aside the feeling that I wasn't being authentic. Despite my insecurities, I knew that my ability to speak openly and honestly about sexuality was a strength – and that I didn't have to reveal everything about myself just because vulnerability performs well online. There were hardly any feminist asexual people in the public eye, and I certainly didn't want to be one of the first. Until – as I read more and more feminist literature that seemed to stop short at my doorstep – I was no longer able to ignore my own discomfort with the state of contemporary feminism. I searched in vain for traces of the Not in the Mood Club in the history of sex positivity. And when I came across criticism of sex positivity, it sounded conservative, outdated, and uncool. Not what I wanted to be.

Sexual revolution

To understand where the concept of sex positivity comes from, it helps to look at the history of modern feminism. The debate over the term – and what it represents – has been raging since the sexual revolution of the 1960s. At the time, feminists asked themselves: Is sex a tool of oppression or of liberation?

While first-wave feminism focused on very fundamental issues such as women's suffrage, second-wave feminists – from the 1960s onwards – increasingly turned their attention to sex. In Germany, key concerns included Section 218 of the Criminal Code (i.e., the abortion law), gender equality, and the legalisation of the contraceptive pill.[1] The fact that sex can mean not only reproduction but also communication, intimacy, and pleasure was, for the first time, discussed loudly and collectively. The phrase 'the personal is political' also emerged during the second wave of feminism and is closely associated with Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay *The Personal is Political*. In it, she argues that many of the problems women face – such as violence in relationships or emotional dependency – are not personal failings, but expressions of social power structures. At the time, women were often blamed for their own suffering, rather than structural inequality being acknowledged. That's something we should keep in mind today when it comes to sexual disinterest: If we say 'I have a headache' instead of honestly admitting 'I'm not in the mood', is that personal or political? I say political.[2]

Second-wave feminists not only fought for equal rights in education and employment, but also raised essential questions about the body, sexuality, and self-determination. Key figures of this wave in Germany included Alice Schwarzer, Verena Stefan, and Katharina Ogontoye. Together with many other allies, they helped ensure that rape within marriage was recognised as a criminal offence. We also have them to thank for the partial decriminalisation of abortion,

and for the fact that female sexual pleasure is no longer treated merely as an offshoot of male sexuality. Much of this may seem self-evident today – and Alice Schwarzer's views, for example, are now rightly the subject of sharp criticism (more on that later). But these achievements are anything but self-evident.

During this period, women's needs found a voice in two major movements. On the one hand, there were the women of the 1968 student protests, who liberated people from the grip of institutional, religious, and state-imposed moral codes. They belonged to the 'pro-sex' camp within the feminism of the time. At the same time, there was a counter-movement often described as 'anti-sex'. Anti-sex feminists viewed sex as a patriarchal instrument of power and rejected it outright. In this context, 'patriarchal instrument of power' means that sex wasn't seen as an expression of desire or intimacy, but rather as a means by which men exert control over women. Through social norms, physical abuse, and emotional dependency, men continued to hold power. This debate between pro-sex and anti-sex feminists later became known as the 'feminist sex wars'.

Women such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon were on the anti-sex side, arguing that pornography, prostitution, and many sexual practices – such as dominance games – were expressions of patriarchal violence and oppression.[4] MacKinnon, a lawyer, criticized feminist voices that were considered pro-sex for mistaking adaptation to existing conditions for freedom.

Dworkin, an American writer, became one of the most prominent figures in the sex wars at the time. She made a name for herself with the publication of her book *PorNography – Men Possessing Women* in 1981, which also sparked heated debate in Germany.[6]

On the other side, sex-positive feminists emphasized that women had the right to guilt-free promiscuity – including heterosexual sex, if they wanted it. The 1981 essay *Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?* is considered by many to mark the birth of sex-positive feminism. In it, Ellen Willis, a left-wing essayist, argued that MacKinnon's critique of sex was problematic: not only did it deny women the right to sexual pleasure, but it also reinforced the stereotype that men desire sex while women merely tolerate it.[7] Anti-porn feminism, Willis wrote, demands that women accept a supposed moral superiority as a substitute for sexual pleasure. Offering women moral superiority instead of pleasure – and attempting to regulate male sexuality – was, in her view, the wrong approach. Instead, she called for a focus on female sexual autonomy. A truly radical feminism, according to Willis, must also ask why we desire what we desire – and what we would choose if our choices were truly free.

In short, anti-sex feminists believed that pornography, prostitution, and many sexual practices oppressed women and reinforced male power. Pro-sex feminists, on the other hand, argued that sexuality could also mean pleasure and self-determination. What mattered most, they said, was that women themselves decided what they wanted.

Another criticism directed at opponents of sex positivity – less discussed at the time but increasingly prominent today – is transphobia. Anti-sex feminists at times excluded trans women from their feminism. Even today, for many radical feminists, criticism of sex positivity is closely intertwined with transphobic positions.[8] Then as now, there are calls for a ‘return to truth’: to the ‘real woman’, to ‘real desire’, to ‘real safety’. Sex work is dismissed as patriarchal violence, and trans women are often denied their very womanhood – both supposedly in the name of protecting ‘biological women’. This line of argument rests on rigid ideas about gender and sexuality, reproducing the very forms of exclusion that feminism originally set out to challenge.

While radical feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon have shown their support for the trans community and view gender as socially constructed, Alice Schwarzer – who drew much inspiration for her writings from Dworkin – does not. As a result, she is considered outdated within today’s intersectional feminism and, due to her transphobic and anti-Muslim statements, divisive and exclusionary. Schwarzer remains an important figure in second-wave feminism, but she increasingly represents a white, biologistic feminism of the past that often fails to account for diversity and instead seeks to regulate it.

The anti-sex feminism of the second wave generally operates within the same field of tension. Although it arose from justified criticism of male violence, it often aligns itself with conservative ideas. Sexuality is understood almost exclusively as a site of exploitation. In the process, the voices of sex workers, queer people,

and trans individuals are quickly marginalized. Some of these arguments are now found not only in radical feminist circles but also in right-wing think tanks and the so-called manosphere.[9] What was originally intended to protect thus primarily restricts those who don't conform to the traditional image of femininity, sexuality, or identity.

I had my first sexual experiences only after having explored feminism – and I consider this sequence of events a huge privilege that spared me from many horrors. But as a modern feminist, I've also learned that anything not sex-positive is often labelled prudish, sex-negative, or a sign of internalized shame. As a result, I advocate for and consume porn made for women, think it's ok for rough sex to sometimes hurt, and recognize prostitution as legitimate 'sex work'. However, when I talk to young women who don't live in big cities or aren't 'feminist-savvy', the world looks very different. Penises are still being drawn on school desks, and biology classes don't clearly distinguish between the vagina and the vulva. Nude photos are circulating in the youth club's chat groups, and nobody wants to claim responsibility. This is incredibly confusing – and not just for us members of the Not in the Mood Club. Talking openly about your body count? No problem. Proudly declaring you're a virgin and plan to stay that way? That's weird somehow.

To understand the other trends that emerged during the second wave of feminism and the rise of sex positivity, we need to look at another movement. In the 1960s, alongside the sex wars, the so-called ‘fun ethic’ was being discussed. The term was coined by the American social scientist Martha Wolfenstein,[10] who used it to describe a social change that took place after the Second World War: Having fun was not only permitted – it was virtually mandatory. Those who didn’t have fun were viewed with suspicion. Traditional values such as discipline and self-control took a back seat. Even leisure time suddenly had to be productive and fulfilling. Play became especially important in child-rearing – not as a form of free expression, but as an objective: the child should be happy and able to flourish.

Later, this came to be seen as a symptom of consumer culture. Fun was no longer a private matter but had become a social expectation. In a 1967 lecture, Theodor W. Adorno remarked, ‘You have to have fun, otherwise you’re uptight.’[11] He criticised how, under this new obligation to have fun, sexuality, rather than becoming freer, was growing more conformist.[12] According to him, sex had been disarmed – stripped of its chaos, disorder, and rebelliousness. Instead of being wild, sex became plannable, efficient, marketable. Adorno viewed this not as progress but as a new compulsion: anyone who doesn’t have fun is regarded with suspicion. Even desire was subjected to the logic of performance and self-optimisation, with sexuality becoming something that could be scheduled and monetised but no longer necessarily had anything to do

with desire. He emphasised that modern society promotes a ‘fun ethic’, pressuring people to have fun to the point that it becomes an obligation. This leads even leisure activities to be subordinated to rational self-interest, ultimately eroding their enjoyment.

Fascinating, isn’t it? I catch myself feeling guilty when, for example, I count the months I go without a fling and somehow feel ashamed – even though I’m simply living in a way that suits me. In other words, the ‘fun ethic’ had quietly crept into my life too, making me feel like I constantly had to be entertained or entertain myself.

But it wasn’t only ‘man-hating radical feminists’ who linked sexuality to power struggles and criticised them. The French philosopher Michel Foucault was convinced that the sexual revolution hadn’t had the effect many expected. In his 1976 book *The Will to Knowledge*, he introduced the so-called repression hypothesis,[13] which challenges the myth that the Church, the state, and bourgeois morality had long suppressed sex. Foucault argued that sex wasn’t suppressed but rather regulated – through language, science, and institutions. Instead of being spoken about less, sex was discussed more – just in a more controlled way. From priests to psychoanalysts, from medicine to sex education, new voices were continually telling us how to think and feel about sex.

Then came the 1980s. In 1982, the Weather Girls sang: ‘It’s raining men! Hallelujah! It’s raining men! Amen. I’m gonna go out to run and let myself get absolutely soaking wet.’ A raunchy song that gay men, in particular, loved. But just as sexual liberation was gaining momentum, the AIDS epidemic suddenly raised questions about the risks and consequences of this newly won freedom. Since 1981, the immune deficiency disease has claimed well over 35 million lives.[14] It also brought a new emphasis on safer sex practices, which became part of the sex-positive movement. The goal was to talk about safe and healthy sexuality – without shame or stigma. At the same time, the epidemic led to the realisation that not everyone was safe in their sexual liberation. Gay men allegedly regularly had anonymous sex with large numbers of other men – behaviour that had been considered the new normal for gay men since the sexual revolution. But with the rise of AIDS, this very promiscuity was suddenly publicly framed as the main cause of the disease. From that point on, gay men were expected to embrace abstinence or at least restrict themselves to monogamous relationships. Sex workers also came under pressure, viewed as an additional source of risk – their work was expected to be put on hold or more strictly regulated. And while heterosexual members of the middle class enjoyed access to non-discriminatory basic healthcare, gay men were portrayed as having brought the illness upon themselves.[15]

By the mid-1980s, AIDS had altered the nature of sexualisation. ‘The era of the “liberation” imperative was coming to an end, even as sexualisation had lost

none of its momentum', writes historian Franz X. Eder in an article for the anthology *Sexuelle Revolution?* (*Sexual Revolution?*), in which he explores the preliminary effects and aftermath of the revolution in Germany.[16]

Yet even as the 1980s brought increased visibility for queer issues, asexuality remained entirely invisible.

Third- and fourth-wave feminism

From the mid-1990s onwards, we entered what's known as the third wave of feminism. For the sex-positive movement, this meant an inclusive and intersectional understanding of sexuality. Sexual self-objectification – that is, being really in the mood and acting on it (whether in private or through sex work) – can mean very different things for different women. A white woman who fits normative beauty standards may experience sexual agency differently than a Black woman or a trans woman. There was, and still is, no consensus among feminists, but topics such as BDSM, pornography, and sex work were re-evaluated, often through the lens of self-empowerment. Representation in the media also became a major topic of discussion, as film and television influenced our viewing habits. Films, books, and series began to show more open and diverse portrayals of sexuality, with *Sex and the City* and *The Vagina Monologues* contributing to the destigmatisation of female pleasure. And the music of the 1990s was sexier than ever: 'Boom, boom, boom, boom, I want you

in my room. Let's spend the night together, from now until forever', sang the Vengaboys – and I sang along at the top of my lungs in a smoky carnival tent in my youth. Female pop artists were also part of the trend. In the 2000s, I certainly had no clue what Christina Aguilera meant when she sang 'I'm a genie in a bottle, you gotta rub me the right way.'[17]

Then, the internet finally truly liberated us – at least, that's how it felt for a moment. A new era of sexual education began, one in which biology textbooks, school lessons, and teen magazine articles were no longer our only sources of information. Instead, we turned to blogs, forums, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos. The age of the World Wide Web made it possible to talk openly about sexuality, learn about consent, and bring visibility to marginalised sexual identities. We read blog posts about clitoral orgasms, the history of the vulva, and the political dimension of bodily fluids – and shared them all with a click. No one wanted to be prudish anymore; no one wanted to seem uptight – everyone wanted to be sex-positive. We followed the hashtag #BodyPositivity, which promised us that every body was beautiful – until eventually it was populated almost entirely with slim, white fitness influencers sharing sparkly stretch mark stories. There were countless articles and books on so-called 'female pleasure', explaining that masturbation was feminist, and that we had the right to demand orgasms. Vulvas were suddenly no longer embarrassing but had become pop culture, adorning socks, candles, necklaces, and artworks. For the first time, I

let my armpit hair grow – because I wasn't sure anymore whether I actually wanted to shave it or just thought I was supposed to. And suddenly it became possible to show open solidarity with sex workers, who explained – in panels, podcasts, and documentaries – that their work was neither dirty nor forced, but simply wage labour.

It was a time when feminist discourse was more present than ever in pop culture. We rapped along as Shirin David railed against double standards: 'Dangerous woman, as if I were Ariana Grande. From "By God, she's sexy" to "Vallah, she's a slut"'. Beyoncé asked, 'Who runs the world?' and we shouted back, 'Girls!' These were all expressions of a new feminist wave – one that organised itself online, was mutually encouraging, and achieved unprecedented mainstream visibility. It was the moment many now refer to as the fourth wave of feminism: intersectional, media-savvy, empowering – but also increasingly commercial. It became 'hard out here for a bitch'.[18]

This phase revived old debates but was also characterised by a feminism that strongly emphasised individual freedom of choice. Social structures were rarely taken into account in this form of mainstream feminism, also known as 'choice feminism'. Choice feminism is based on the idea that every decision a woman makes – whether it's wearing high heels, having lots of sex, using OnlyFans, getting breast surgery, being monogamous, or performing in porn – is automatically feminist, as long as it was made of her own free will. What counts is the choice itself – not the circumstances surrounding it and not whether the

decision actually expands freedoms, or maybe merely repackages existing expectations.

Choice feminism fits perfectly into a neoliberal logic in which anything is possible as long as you really want it – and if you fail, it's probably because you haven't worked hard enough on yourself. This form of feminism tells us that the solution lies within: that you should love yourself, celebrate your body, find your pleasure, and communicate your boundaries – as clearly and efficiently as possible. It's a form of empowerment that's easy to market because it doesn't call for collective change but for individual self-improvement.

British cultural theorist and professor Angela McRobbie describes this as a kind of slow-motion backlash: outwardly, it looks like women today are freer than ever, but in reality traditional gender relations are being restructured and secured – just more subtly, through consumption, beauty ideals, and performance pressure.[19] McRobbie sees a dynamic in which girls and young women willingly play along because they believe they've chosen it themselves. But the rules haven't disappeared – they've simply been disguised better. The fashion and beauty industry continues to make women feel small and inadequate, trapped in a cycle of constant self-improvement, never quite good enough. It's a system dressed up in Instagram filters and self-love slogans, even as it ensures that women optimise themselves to the point of exhaustion: strong on the outside, insecure on the inside. Ariana Grande sings in a breathy voice,

‘I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it’,[20] celebrating that she no longer needs a man to buy her what she wants – because she can get it for herself.

McRobbie calls a woman who buys into self-optimisation and supposed freedom a ‘phallic girl’. By this, she means a young woman who appears bold, loud, self-confident, and perhaps even rebellious on the outside. She pushes back, refuses to play the role of smiling femininity, and wants to define her own image. But even she remains trapped in a system rooted in male power and heterosexual norms. Girls are expected to be caring and assertive, sexy and successful, desirable yet confident. According to McRobbie, the post-feminist woman appropriates a form of female phallicism – adopting sexually masculine behaviours that make her think she’s living in gender equality. This contradiction wears many people down, as they try to emulate the rules of a system that wasn’t made for them.[21]

As a result, McRobbie asks not just how much power young women have today, but also how free they really are, if that power can only be exercised through achievement, attractiveness, and conformity. And what happens when they choose not to play along? And possibly the most important question for me: What if you don’t want to be a phallic girl? What if you’re not interested in desire, dates, performance, toys, or self-optimisation? What if you’re not curious – just… neutral? Then you fall through the cracks. You no longer fit the aesthetics of this new feminist coolness. Not being interested suddenly seems like a break with progress – a regression, or even a betrayal.

Sex sells

The doorbell rings. The DHL delivery man grumpily hands me a parcel.

‘Mobile phone accessories’, he grumbles, quoting the large print on the box. His expression softens when he sees the nameplate by my door. ‘Popov? Ruski?’

He smiles, tilts his head, and points at me. For a moment, he seems hopeful that he’s met a fellow countrywoman.

‘No, Bulgarian’, I reply, and close the door.

What he probably doesn’t know is that ‘mobile phone accessories’ is really code for sex toys. When ordering from the online shop of my choice, I can choose which sender’s label appears on the package, so the postman – and the whole world – don’t know who it’s really from. These days, I wouldn’t order sex toys secretly online anymore; I’d simply walk openly into a shop to buy them. But I’ve often asked myself: If sex positivity has been commercialised (as it has been in the booming market for sex toys), who really profits from the hype – the industry or the users? Many women experience their first orgasm thanks to these toys, yet at the same time it’s mainly male CEOs of big corporations who are behind the industry.

Foucault, the pop star among scholars who studied sex and power, probably would have observed this with amusement. For him, sexuality was never simply

oppression or liberation, but a constantly changing instrument of power. Maybe the question isn't whether we're sex-positive or sex-negative – slap on a label and be done with it; rather, our task is to take a closer look at who benefits from a given narrative. Don't get me wrong: the fact that women's pleasure is now widely discussed is a huge step forward. Yet the reality that this pleasure remains subject to economic and patriarchal logic reminds us that liberation isn't the same thing as freedom.

Since the 1960s, sexual liberation has primarily served white middle-class men. Capitalism and patriarchy quickly recognised that sex functions not only as a means of control, but also as a commodity. *Sex sells*. Companies discovered sex positivity as a marketing strategy. Women in lacey lingerie sell expensive perfumes. Dating apps use the language of self-determined sexual freedom to lure people onto a consumerist merry-go-round, where you collect 'matches' like items in a shopping basket. The beauty industry revolves around the 'sexually attractive' body, which needs to be endlessly optimised with products, surgery, and filters. Those who don't feel sexy buy the feeling. Another so-called product of sexual liberation that largely served men – and sometimes degraded women – was *Playboy* magazine. First published in 1953, the now-defunct periodical quickly became a cultural symbol of sexual liberation. Yet despite its veneer of liberalism, the definition of sexuality it propagated was, in fact, decidedly conservative: Women had to be heterosexual, blonde, voluptuous, sexually available, and insatiably hungry for sex. All this for the male gaze.[22]

In an essay for the Federal Centre for Health Education, psychotherapist Claudia Haarmann writes about the negative consequences of the sexual revolution, concluding: ‘Of course, the sexual revolution also has real winners: the media companies. Sex sells. The porn industry alone has an annual global turnover of around €100 billion. Added to this are television, cinema, the internet, and advertising. Across media channels, the message is that modern people are horny, extremely active, and living fulfilling sex lives.’[23] Media scholars have also explored how advertising- and profit-driven media amplify representations of sexuality. So-called ‘oversexualisation’ describes the growing presence and importance of sex and sexuality in both public and private life.[24] This trend is visible in various media formats: newspapers and magazines focus more and more on sexualised content, music videos often feature exaggerated representations of physicality, television series and video games increasingly foreground sexuality, and advertising deploys sex as a sales strategy.[25] The same dynamic is also evident in song lyrics, on the internet, and even in the design of products such as clothing. The growing media presence of sexuality shapes not only social norms but also individual perceptions of physicality and gender.[26]

When asking whom the sexual revolution and the sex-positive movement serves, one answer is unavoidable: men – and not just Hugh Hefner with his Playboy Mansion. Men with painted fingernails and feminism T-shirts that help them strike up conversations with women in clubs. Self-proclaimed ‘male

feminists' who embrace the label because it benefits them sexually. The ones who declare in feminist spaces: 'As a man, I want to empower you to discover your desire' – only to then mansplain female desire to women, and act surprised when they're met with annoyed eye-rolling instead of gratitude.

When, at around 15, I decided I was old enough to trade in girls' magazines for women's magazines, I chose *Cosmopolitan*. Articles like '30 Ways to Make Him Happy', '12 Things You Can Do with a Naked Man', and '8 Tips for the Perfect Blow Job' say it all. Recipes and household tips were replaced by instructions for blowjobs, flirting tips, and recommendations for flavoured lubricants. The focus remained unchanged: it was still all about pleasing men and meeting their needs as perfectly as possible. Only now, the emphasis was on pleasure rather than comfort and housekeeping. Ass-licking has become literal, and the phallic girl is right at the centre of it all, true to the motto 'Lick my pussy and my crack'.[27] Women are still expected to make men happy – but they should make it look effortless. I've spoken to women who endured pain during sex for years without ever telling their partners. And to women who had abortions after one-night stands without informing the men – because, even though you're expected to share your body, the reality that this body can become pregnant would have brought too much responsibility with it.

So what am I then: sex-positive or sex-negative? Do I think all the talk about sex has been pointless? That would be an incredibly sad realisation, considering that I myself have offered sex education online as a presenter and editor, and am currently writing an entire book about sex – or rather, the absence of it.

Already back in his day, Foucault said that it wasn't silence that governed sexuality, but the constant talk about it. Not prohibition, but regulation. Not repression, but reproduction. Decades later, this thesis can be applied amazingly well to the hype surrounding sex positivity. The promises are great: finally, we're allowed to talk about lust, kinks, polyamory, and consent. There's OnlyFans, vulva earrings, pressure-wave vibrators. Everything seems open, fluid, empowering. And yet, many feel that something's off. Even though we talk, share, celebrate, and educate so much, many people don't experience true freedom in their sexuality. Instead, a new set of expectations has emerged. Curiosity has become the norm, and those who abstain from sex aren't just shamed but pathologized. Those who aren't in the mood have to justify themselves. Here, too, female desire is controlled under the guise of liberation. Those who are sexually liberated are also expected to perform and be available, to be knowledgeable and able to set boundaries (but not too many, please). Sex workers are expected to be self-determined and feminist, and not to complain when their boundaries are crossed.

There's no doubt that sex positivity has opened many doors, but we shouldn't pretend we've all already walked through them. As long as freedom remains tied

to performance, visibility, and market conformity, we will continue to need feminism – not as a moral authority, but as a tool to look beyond what is sold to us as ‘natural’.

In her book *Ace*, Angela Chen describes how this tension suppresses asexuality and continues to shape many of today’s debates about sexuality. She distinguishes between two forms of freedom: freedom *for* something and freedom *from* something. Sex-positive feminists rightly fought *for* freedom – for the right to have sex, to feel pleasure, to be allowed to do the same things as men – without shame, without double standards. But, she argues, the criticism from the anti-sex position is equally valid: freedom *from* sexual objectification, from social pressure to *have* to be desirable, and from the idea that sex is inherently something good. Both perspectives are necessary, yet the second has often been overlooked. This is one of the reasons why the pro-versus-anti-sex debate is being reignited right now.

Interestingly, one side of the sex debate is particularly vocal these days: conservative feminists. They argue that modern, ‘woke’ feminism has failed even more spectacularly than the sexual revolution itself when it comes to sex. They advocate for a return to a more conservative value system – one that recognises that men and women are biologically different and maintains that sex belongs within marriage, allegedly because this protects women from unwanted

pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence.[28] While I absolutely disagree with this view, I think it's important to take a closer look at the argument – because I'm pretty sure this position will only grow louder in the coming years.

One such conservative voice is British journalist Louise Perry. In her book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, she presents a provocative thesis: Sexual liberation, as preached by liberal feminism, isn't a triumph but an illusion – a myth that harms women in particular. Perry sees hook-up culture as a modern form of exploitation, in which women are reduced to consumer goods and emotional cannon fodder for male desire. Her conclusion: a return to sexual restraint, monogamy, and marriage as a safe haven for women.[29]

What at first glance sounds like a feminist issue – protecting women from violence, strengthening emotional self-esteem, respecting boundaries – quickly turns, in Perry's hands, into a narrative of sexual morality. Male sexuality is portrayed as dangerous, female sexuality as vulnerable. She argues that young women shouldn't have sex as long as they're not sure whether they'd want to have children with the man. For her, consent alone is not enough to make a sexual encounter legitimate or healthy – especially in a culture permeated by pornography, which she believes systematically desensitises young people.

Perry taps into real grievances: violence, exploitation, emotional emptiness, unexamined power dynamics. And she's right to say that certain aspects of so-

called sex positivity – such as the trivialisation of male dominance fantasies in hardcore porn – barely withstand critical feminist analysis. But rather than interrogating structural power relations or advocating for sexual education and solidarity-based practices, Perry proposes a retreat into conservative patterns.

Feminists such as Louise Perry often struggle with being labelled ‘conservative’. In interviews, Perry makes an effort to clarify that she’s not anti-liberal, and she rejects the accusation that she has always held conservative views. ‘I come from a feminist background’, she explains in one interview, citing concerns such as protecting women and girls. But after her work at a women’s counselling centre for survivors of sexual violence and her research into the downsides of our sex-positive culture, she has arrived at some socially conservative conclusions and now describes herself and some of her peers as ‘reactionary and post-liberal’.

Whatever you choose to call this emerging group of feminists – who might once have been described as sex-negative and now identify as post-liberal – I’m not buying into their argument. I understand what critics of certain strands of liberal sexual politics, like Louise Perry, are responding to. Her experiences in a counselling centre and her reflections on sex work are real, serious, and, for many women, painfully relatable. Her disappointment with a feminist theory that, in practice, can sometimes feel oddly disconnected from lived reality, is not without merit. Even so, for me, her return to conservative ideals leads in the wrong direction. Perry speaks of ‘freedom as an illusion’, and that’s where she loses me – not because I think freedom is a reality we’ve already achieved, but

because I believe we must necessarily continue to demand it. Invoking conservative values like chastity, chivalry, or marriage is not a solution, but rather just another repackaging of old power structures.

There are liberal and left-wing feminists who have already seen, considered and addressed this contradiction. They've made it clear that sexual freedom doesn't mean having to do everything, but being allowed to do everything. I'd even take it a step further and demand that we be allowed to do everything, but also encouraged not to want to do anything. That can't be achieved with old-new rules, but only by asking: Who benefits from what – and who's left out again? My impression of conservative feminists is that their proposed solutions are defensive strategies often only intended to protect white, cisgender women. And there's another important aspect: criticism of oversexualisation from conservative and right-wing quarters – whether from feminists or non-feminists – also becomes problematic when framed as a desire to 'protect' children and young people. These arguments often invoke so-called moral protection and aim to keep young people away from sexuality by calling for the abolition of sex education in schools or insisting that only heteronormative sexual practices be taught.[30]

The strategies of conservative feminists don't lead to greater solidarity among women or to more freedom – rather, they create new boundaries. Instead of

declaring the revolution a failure, what we need is a feminism that brings together desire, consent, power dynamics, and emotional security – without blame and without romanticised regression. Because the answer doesn't lie in a return to chastity, but in building a culture where sexuality is *truly* voluntary – for everyone.

Sex positive or just neutral?

In *Mansion Song*, musician Kate Nash recites a poem, released in 2010. Although *My Best Friend Is You* was by far my most-listened-to album of the 2010s, I'd never actually listened to this track all the way through. I always skipped it on my MP3 player, which looked like an iPod, with its small colour screen, but wasn't as expensive. In *Mansion Song*, Kate Nash virtually screamed the words, which didn't resonate with me at all: 'I wanna be fucked and then rolled over, cause I'm an independent woman of the 21st century. No time for knits, I want sex and debauchery […] I can get fucked like the best of men, like the worst of pain.'[31]

In 2010, I felt uncomfortable with this loudly proclaimed openness about sex. Ten years later, I was the one holding sex toys up to the camera – offensively and without taboos – for a public television programme. And today, I've researched the history of sex positivity and pointed out its limitations. I've understood the criticism from radical and self-proclaimed post-liberal feminists –

but I've rejected it. So, what happens now? I'm not really into labels like 'sex-negative', 'woke', or other terms that suggest I have all the answers.

If I had to sum it up, I'd say that, for me personally, there's too much sex and too much forced positivity in 'sex positivity'. If the sexual revolution had been a movement that centred female needs – or maybe we should say human needs – what would it be called? Would we now be talking about an 'intimacy-positive' or 'sex-neutral' movement?

I'd like to be guided by a certain development in the body positivity movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s parallel to the second wave of feminism and aimed to end structural discrimination – not to make self-love an obligation. Social media, in particular, later turned it into a hashtag that increasingly moved away from its original meaning. At some point, Black activists in particular – such as Roxane Gay,[32] Sonya Renee Taylor, and Da'Shaun Harrison [33] – began to criticise the movement.

In 2015, nutritionist and author Anne Poirier wrote a book called *The Body Joyful*. She was one of the first to popularise the concept of body neutrality, or neutrality toward one's own body.[34] Body neutrality is understood as an attitude that 'supports neither the rejection nor the excessive worship of our bodies (our physical appearance).'[35]

One of the most important German activists is Melodie Michelberger. In her book *Body Politics* (2021), she writes about positivity: 'The longer I think about

language, the more problematic the popular term “body positivity” seems to me. […] What does “positive” mean in this context? Do I have to think my body is awesome every day in order to be included? Wouldn’t we rather work towards making body shape irrelevant?’[1]

I think we can learn a lot from activists here. In a world where self-love isn’t taught to everyone equally, it’s difficult to experience that love for oneself. The same is true for the Not in the Mood Club.

Criticism of sex positivity shouldn’t be a call to renounce sex, nor should it become a new moral standard. It shouldn’t shame people who want to experiment or celebrate themselves in their sexuality. What a sex-critical perspective aims to achieve, as Angela Chen also points out, is a view that takes into account both individual self-determination and structural inequalities. It’s about recognising that desire isn’t neutral, but shaped by society.

Not everyone who has a lot of sex is brave – and not everyone who has little or no sex is uptight. A sex-critical feminism celebrates not only those who want to, but also those who don’t – without pathologizing, without pressure to perform. When we stop evaluating sexuality as inherently positive, intimacy, context, and mutual responsibility come to the fore. Criticism of sex positivity isn’t a call to return to prudery or shame. It’s meant to be a step forward – towards a culture in which desire, lack of desire, and neutrality can coexist on equal terms. So

that we can finally create spaces where there's room for everyone: those who are in the mood for it, and those who simply aren't.

[END OF SAMPLE]