



Talking About **Sexual** **Pleasure**: How Does **Language** Make a **Difference?**

by Neha Patel

What do we think of pleasure?

Sexual pleasure has always been a topic that stirs up a gamut of thoughts and feelings, among which are interest, curiosity, shame, and excitement. There has always been something unquantifiable associated with studying pleasure, understanding its nuances, articulating its links with sexuality, and knowing what it means to each of us individually.

The language we use to talk about sexuality is already controversial—sexuality has come to the forefront of many debates in several different contexts—medical, social, cultural, activist, feminist, public health, and

as opposed to what we *want* to be doing. The language of sexual pleasure has been restrictive, fear-based, and limiting. It constantly tries to set boundaries for “normal” pleasure. Advocates for “sexual well-being and pleasure” often hear about how that means individuals have the ability to be “free of sexually transmitted infections” and “free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.” We do not hear of the ability to “have as much pleasure as possible,” or “define sexual pleasure for oneself.” Sexual pleasure has been looked at as something we can “indulge” in only after we remove all the pain and abuse. As if when we remove all the violence, what will eventually remain is a sexuality that we can automatically enjoy!

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so on. But, in the activist spaces, we are still talking about how to understand sexuality (specifically, sexual pleasure) in order to control it, not about how to enhance its relationship to our well-being.

This is partly because we do not have the comfort level to do it; partly because we have traditionally looked at sexual pleasure as being the domain of medicine and commercial media, and not activism and development; and also partly because when we try to talk about it, we are limited in the scope of language that we use to describe it.

Indeed, when it comes to sexual pleasure, it has always been easier to discuss what we *should not* be doing,

We are not as concerned with the pursuit of pleasure when it is derived from areas like our careers, food, travel. Most people claim to understand and identify with that. But when pleasure is derived from sex, what is it about the pursuit of sexual pleasure that causes people to treat it as the most “illegitimate” form of pleasure? What is it about thinking, constructing, and understanding how we get sexual pleasure that prevents us from talking about it? Oftentimes, we think pleasure is a peripheral, elitist, and luxurious issue to talk about. Many activists think there are many other important and more critical issues to deal with first—whether it is poverty, HIV/AIDS, gender equality, resource management and distribution, public health issues—before addressing pleasure.

But how do we push a dialogue forward that incorporates these

diversities around sexual pleasure, while allowing for it to be affirmative and non-judgmental? For as uncomfortable as it makes us to talk about sexual pleasure, it is critical to understand the role it plays in our well-being.

In an effort to provide a more constructive space to take up and discuss issues of sexual pleasure, The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality¹ designed an e-forum discussion on “Sexual Pleasure, Sexuality and Rights.”² The discussion was for those interested in critiquing and analysing the discourses around sexual pleasure, sexuality, and rights. We had over 200 participants from all over the world who signed up and took part, enriching the discussion and highlighting several concepts surrounding sexual pleasure that do not receive legitimacy, let alone attention, in the debate on sexuality and rights. The e-forum on the topic ran from October 17 to December 27, 2005.

What does the e-forum space look like?

The e-forum of the Resource Centre is designed for activists, practitioners, academics, students, researchers, and anyone who is interested in issues around sexuality to dialogue with one another, express their opinions, contribute ideas, and share experiences of working on issues of sexuality.

There are some limitations to utilising an e-forum space because many people in South and South-East Asia do not have access to e-mail, and our e-forum caters to those who write in English. Moreover, when we talk about the need for a language on pleasure, many terms related to sexuality do not often translate into local meanings, which does not necessarily mean that those concepts do not exist in those communities. It is just that local meanings for sexuality and related terms do not always translate literally. Given these limitations, it was not possible to have a comprehensive debate with those working on these issues in South and South-East Asia. But the e-forum is a platform for beginning these discussions. Moreover, the e-forum as a starting point for discussion is also a platform for translations of the discussions into various languages in the region, and a more expanded dissemination strategy, which includes electronic and print resources.

The e-forum’s discussions are designed to be structured, moderated spaces that address a particular topic every two months. In those two months, the topic is broken into four sub-topics, each addressing a different



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aspect of the debate and linking various concepts together.

How did we get ready?

It was a fascinating exercise to try to breakdown sexual pleasure into four debatable sub-topics that all tied together. First, we had to look at how we ourselves looked at sexual pleasure, and if there was a logical way to deconstruct our own ideas related to pleasure and well-being. And given the subjectivity of pleasure, did we want to set parameters for discussion

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and define boundaries? How did we ensure inclusion of topics that we do not talk about enough, those we have not defined yet, and those that are controversial?

Through this process of asking ourselves questions about how we thought and talked about pleasure, what became clear was that we realised it would be very difficult to present the idea of talking about sexual pleasure if we were censoring ourselves. So we began by conducting several brainstorming sessions with staff members on all the potential topics within sexual pleasure. With the idea of being as creative as possible, we asked colleagues to think about sexual pleasure in terms of all the things they were curious about and which they wanted to discuss with others; the topics they thought were

relevant for discussion but were never part of the realm of discourses in sexuality. An exciting list emerged—with ideas ranging from sexual practices, behaviours, norms, concepts, theories, entire frameworks turned upside-down, to challenges to the status quo. Next, we researched topics so as to include some of the major debates and contentions therein, and from the categories that emerged, we then tried to define what could be the questions around the categories. Language and how we talk about pleasure was an inevitable way to begin the discussion—what could we say about it if we felt that the language used to describe pleasure was inadequate in the first place?

The language of pleasure: The discussion on the first sub-topic³

We almost always look to language first to try to see if it can convey our diverse realities and multiple experiences. But there is no one way to think and talk about, analyse, construct, express, experience, view, or ensure sexual pleasure. What is defined as sexual pleasure in one context today, for you, or someone else, may not be defined as such the next day. What are our assumptions and ideas around sexual pleasure? Why do we construct pleasure in the ways that we do? When beginning to analyse sexual pleasure, communicating what we mean becomes the biggest challenge, especially if we are trying to articulate a more affirmative perspective of sexual pleasure. And taking from one of the questions posed by an e-forum participant: “What does it mean to talk a language of pleasure?”



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What is pleasure? Pleasure is what makes us feel good. It increases our sense of well-being and creates a feeling of enjoyment. We pursue, experience, understand, negotiate, and feel pleasure in many ways—in fantasies, in anticipation, in ideas, in deeds, and in thoughts. Pleasure is constructed in a myriad of ways by society, by our peers, by relationships, by norms, by values, and by ourselves. The e-forum participants discussed “The Language of Pleasure” in Sub-topic 1, with much to say on the topic. One of the first questions addressed was: “What kinds of words are used to describe sexual pleasure?”

Going further, what are the assumptions of the language we use

to talk about sexual pleasure? Participants highlighted that sexual pleasure was almost always talked about in quantitative ways. And depending on context, we generally feel comfortable identifying levels of “normalcy” in seeking and experiencing sexual pleasure, as if we have to know what “too much pleasure” actually means. The assumptions about what that means about an individual when society tells us that we are out of “normal” boundaries are also damaging. Those who believe in the concept of quantifying sexual pleasure hold on to the idea that desire and pleasure of an individual can be influenced, monitored, modified, and refigured by instituting social, legal and moral limits of what they consider “appropriate.” For example, people seek and define pleasure in a variety of ways like viewing material with sexual content, having sex with multiple partners, having sex multiple times a day using toys to enhance sexual pleasure, etc.

There are two common responses to these pleasure-seeking behaviours. One believes that sexuality is morality-driven, and anyone engaging in any of these activities is “wrong.” Another response is that these behaviours and desires are not “bad,” but there is a limit. And after a certain point, it is most definitely bad—not only for you, but for others around you. Now, we always talk about how too much of anything is bad for a person, but nothing elicits the kind of response that “too much sexual pleasure” does—we call it “obsession,” “addiction,” “sickness.” What about a third response—the one that says “what does it matter?” That

it is irrelevant how many times, how many people, how many things, how many thoughts, and so on? Meaning, so what? Can we not just say that there is a variety of ways by which individuals experience, live, and express their sexuality and their desire without judgement or indicators?

It is difficult to do this for a variety of reasons—the language to support this last response is not really in the realm of the discussion; people have yet to feel comfortable with a sexuality that does not have limits. There seems to be a great need to define and link sexuality to the well-being and order of society. We might say that what one is doing in the privacy of one's home with consent (of self or of others) should not be of concern to

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the people at large. But, somehow, many people believe that if we were allowed to pursue sexual pleasure without judgement, we would inevitably become harmful to ourselves and to those around us. This limitation of how we talk about what sexual pleasure prevents us from moving beyond a quantifying model.

Sexual pleasure: Can it be still be subjective in a framework? So, now what? Some have argued that the reason we find it so difficult to talk

about issues of sexual pleasure is because unlike other issues, there is no one framework or definition of sexuality from which we operate. However, the question becomes: “Do we even want a framework in the first place?” This question was met with mixed reactions. Since sexual pleasure is so subjective, one participant noted that developing a framework only further serves to define boundaries for sexuality, normalising certain behaviours and identities, and marginalising what it still least understood. How can we talk about sexual pleasure and sexuality in a way that the framework does not backfire on us? This broad question seems to have thrown in more questions than the answers it sought.

Participants then looked at what kinds of frameworks are already being used to discuss sexual pleasure. HIV/AIDS has legitimised conversations, programmes, policies, laws, and education on sexuality. Gender mainstreaming has been used to tackle how gender analysis affects health indicators, realisation of rights, and disproportional distribution of resources. We have looked at how family planning has opened up the discussions on reproductive and sexual health. But we are still left with a safety and risk analysis of sexuality. Given that, how else can we talk about pleasure except to talk about it as one more thing of which to be afraid?

As mentioned above, medical, media and commercial interest groups have carved out a framework for themselves in the discussion around sexual pleasure, as limiting as it might be. The medical community commonly leads the discussion on developing technologies that enhance

pleasure and conducting research on devising indicators for “normal” experiences and expressions of sexual pleasure. For instance, researchers are constantly devising studies that define

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how long the “normal” woman’s orgasm lasts; or how many she can have in the course of a day. Or what is a “normal” man’s penis size when he is aroused. Or what kinds of “normal” emotions people experience in sex. They try to develop indicators to understand what “out-of-control sexuality” is: how much sex during the week is “too much”; when does it become an “obsession” or “addiction”? As an e-forum participant noted, sexual pleasure has become “professionalised” to the point that science and medicine have claimed so much of the language we use today in communicating about sexual pleasure that it has not only claimed the public space but is now used to describe much of the private space that people use to describe individual experiences, often, inadequately.

The media occupies a space that allows it to create ads that have bold sexual pleasure-seeking messages and images. If you look at popular women’s

magazines, they are constantly telling you things like “Five Ways to Please Your Man,” or “How to Give Yourself an Orgasm in Five Different Positions.” The “pleasure industry” largely markets and develops toys and pleasure supplements. What do these “norms” serve to do except to define boundaries that make those who do not fit into them think about the inevitable “abnormal”? And as one participant pointed out, if we have one standard language for speaking about sexual pleasure, we inevitably dismiss all the ideas and concepts that do not yet have a label, category, or term.

What about activist groups? The space for sexual pleasure discussions and debates among activists has been fragmented at best, at least from a South and South-East Asian perspective, and we are still trying to find the language to talk about it, and create more constructive spaces to do so. The feminist movement has been one such space, but it has not been a uniformly welcoming or affirmative space. In India, feminists have brought many difficult, taboo, and groundbreaking ideas and debates to the public sphere—violence against women, women’s rights, contraception, and abortion (in relation to family planning)—with many successful outcomes. However, their engagement with sexual pleasure, and even sexuality, has been mixed. Recently, feminists are increasingly speaking about sexuality, mainly in connection to HIV/AIDS (and that, too, only in relation to risk and safety), violence against women, and migration issues. Sexual pleasure has not yet fully entered the realm of discussion.

In taking up what activist spaces do

exist, several participants shared many examples of what they had experienced in the form of safe spaces. They gave suggestions on what those spaces would need to include in facilitating an open dialogue about sexual pleasure. Some participants mentioned an online fora as a non-judgemental, moderated space where people could be who they wanted, identify as they wished, and feel free from shame and guilt to discover themselves. Others highlighted discussion groups and cited examples of the ability to moderate the inclusion of pejorative phrases and words. Some

participants suggested that in order to try to include a more expanded view of traditional stereotyped terms around pleasure, the forum could begin creating a dictionary of terms to try to diversify the language around sexual pleasure. Still others thought that creating environments that made it okay for people to accept that they could define pleasure for themselves was an important part of expanding the dialogue to be more affirmative towards sexual pleasure. One e-forum participant observed that there were numerous factors influencing sexual pleasure and its expressions, including how cultures construct people to think about pleasure, which teaches us who, and how, to love.

How are we describing sexual pleasure?

There are rare conversations about sexual pleasure in and of itself—many people think it is indulgent to do so, given there are so many other “legitimate” issues surrounding us—so why talk about sexual pleasure? One e-forum participant critiqued the health framework and asked about the purpose of always talking about sexual pleasure from a health perspective. Another participant responded by stating that being able to approach sexual pleasure from the perspective of people feeling good about sexual pleasure actually minimises risk. Several participants talked about how there was not enough emphasis on mutual pleasure and that the denial of sexuality as a part of well-being was part of the problem. Participants also questioned the wide spectrum of sexual pleasure—the intersection of violence and sexuality, pain and pleasure (“pleasurable pain”), and pleasure and guilt. As one participant pointed out,



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the seemingly opposite terms that comprise “pleasurable pain” open up a whole new possibility for talking about sexual pleasure and experiences associated with it—uncomfortable, to say in the least, but necessary if we want to begin talking about sexual pleasure in a manner that reflects openness and furthering dialogue.

Another interesting thing that was represented in the e-forum discussions was the language used around *who* accessed pleasure. We can see how even the language used around *who* is involved in receiving, giving, and expressing sexual pleasure also need to be expanded. We began by talking about how pleasure was experienced between two people, and how it should be defined by those two people, to talking about how men and women might understand pleasure differently. The discussion moved towards using about a more gender-neutral language around sexual pleasure, and how associating sexual responses with gender might create pressure for people to try and “normalise” their sexual responses. The debate was taken even further as it was discussed that sexual pleasure was not only the physical but the emotional and mental experiences as well. As one participant shared, sexual pleasure can also be derived

from the thought of an act, or the anticipation of it. As others also shared, it is self, it is touches, it is images, anywhere, anytime. There were also participants who asked that definitions and boundaries of sexual pleasure expand to include language that referred to “people” and not the gender binary of “man and woman,” and not to assume that “partners” meant that only two people could enjoy sexual pleasure together. Additionally, the e-forum brought up the need to expand the discourse to include the notion that sexual pleasure is experienced and described by those who are attracted to the same sex.

In conclusion, as we think about ways to move forward from here, the expansion of the language and understanding of pleasure in such diverse contexts is mind-boggling, to say the least. But, at the same time, it is critical to moving forward a more progressive and inclusive dialogue that more accurately represents the diversity around issues of sexual pleasure. ☺

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photo by Avigail Ziv

Neha Patel at the South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality library.

Endnotes

1 The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality, based at TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health), in New Delhi, India, aims at increasing knowledge and scholarship on issues of sexuality, sexual health, and sexual well-being in this region. The Resource Centre specifically focuses on sexuality-related work in China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam. The Centre serves as a space for activists, advocates, practitioners, and researchers to better understand, examine, and expand upon the complex issues surrounding debates on sexuality.

2 To learn more about the Centre and the forum initiative, sign up for the e-forum discussions, and read past messages from the forum, please visit the Resource Centre’s website at <www.asiasrc.org>.

3 The forum continued to discuss three other sub-topics on the issues of the regulation and freedom of pleasure, rights, and some best practices.