

Improving Women's Sexual Assertiveness

I was very interested in the article by Vaughn I. Rickert and colleagues, "Is Lack of Sexual Assertiveness Among Adolescent and Young Adult Women a Cause for Concern?" [2002, 34(4):178–183]. This question could get to the heart of challenges to young women's sexual health in a society that denigrates their sexuality. As the authors note, the development of sexuality is an important part of adolescence. It seems logical that being able to express one's preferences in a sexual encounter would be a key factor in an individual's sexual health. And the findings that almost 20% of survey participants did not believe that they ever had the right to make independent decisions about contraception, to refrain from intercourse without birth control or to make love differently are certainly a wake-up call for all who would naively tell a woman simply to do what she wants or needs in a sexual situation.

Patricia East and Joyce Adams's viewpoint article [2002, 34(4):212–213] elaborates on the powerlessness that young women so often suffer when they have experienced abuse, are younger than their partner or lack accurate information about their sexual rights.

I was surprised and disturbed to see that in both pieces, the authors place the problem and responsibility for female sexual assertiveness squarely and unequivocally in the hands of individual women. There is no acknowledgment of how conceptions of female and male sexuality and of appropriate feminine and masculine behavior make it at best difficult for a girl to act on her sexual rights, even if she is aware of them. Neither set of authors recognizes the context that continues to punish girls and women who attempt to exercise their sexual rights. The notion that we need simply to "fix" girls and women—or get them to fix themselves—to make their lives better is problematic.

In a patriarchal society where women's and girls' sexuality is still met with discomfort and denigration, and in which boys and men continue to believe that women and girls are sexual objects who have no sexual rights or needs, it is often unsafe for women to be sexually assertive. What girls and women need to have

unencumbered access to their sexual rights is a society that rejects the belief that males are natural sexual predators who cannot be held responsible for dominating women and that embraces women's access to all forms of power.

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Rickert and colleagues reply:

We appreciate Dr. Tolman's comments regarding our article. We agree that the current cultural context is a critical issue to address.

Unfortunately, in our society, adolescent sexuality tends to be narrowly viewed in terms of the occurrence or nonoccurrence of intercourse or unintended pregnancy. Our findings underscore the importance of understanding the processes involved in developing strategies and skills to negotiate sexual behaviors within the context of romantic relationships so that effective programs to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy and relationship violence may be developed. Thus, to promote healthy sexuality among both male and female adolescents, interventions at two levels are needed. First, as a society, we must recognize and understand that adolescents are sexual beings; to help them become responsible adults, we must provide them the necessary tools, skills and opportunities to understand and optimize their sexual health. Second, programs should examine specific sexual beliefs of targeted groups so that interventions can be made as relevant and, therefore, as effective as possible.

It is neither our belief nor the intent of this study to "place the problem and responsibility for female sexual assertiveness squarely and unequivocally in the hands of individual women." We addressed our results within the context of interventions directed to adolescent and young adult women attending Title X clinics because this was the population we investigated. In addition, we believe that the strategies suggested in our discussion—interventions in school and community settings targeting

young girls—are examples of how survey data may be translated into practice. We agree that all adolescents should be taught that violence and verbal coercion, especially as they relate to sexual health, are unacceptable. Accomplishing this task will require interventions at multiple levels of our society—legislative, institutional and community—as well as addressing the specific needs of individuals.

East and Adams reply:

We also appreciate Dr. Tolman's letter and the valuable insights she brings to this topic from a feminist's perspective and from her critical work in this area. In response, we reemphasize three points we made in our commentary.

First, we agree that many contextual influences "keep girls from gaining access to their sexual rights." We tried to bring these issues to the fore by discussing, for example, how U.S. policy on children's rights and government spending on sexuality education compromise adolescents' awareness of their sexual rights. We also pointed to relationship dynamics, gender power differentials and how the media's sexual exploitation of women jeopardize women's ability to be sexually assertive. In all, we tried to place the issue of sexual rights within the broader context of human rights in general.

Second, we believe that sexual assertiveness is not solely a female issue, and to imply as much unnecessarily confines the issue. Rather, as we stated, boys are victimized by sexual abuse too. What is at issue here is empowerment of all individuals—male, female, young, old, rich, poor, white, nonwhite. In a perfect world, empowerment would not be diminished by violence, abuse or sexual degradation.

Third, we do not view sexual assertiveness or lack of assertiveness as a condition warranting blame or needing to be fixed. Rather, we believe that all individuals have basic bodily rights. This means the right to decide who touches one's body and the right to refuse any sexual contact at any time and with anyone. It should not be "unsafe for women to be sexually assertive"; women should be able to protect what is an inherent right of all human beings.