



Interactive Share-Net Session Sexual Pleasure: a luxury or a right?

Introduction

On December 9th 2019, Share-Net hosted its first interactive session on sexual pleasure, titled “*Sexual Pleasure: a luxury or a right?*”. The event was organised in collaboration with RNW Media and was held at the Impact Hub in Amsterdam.

So, why have a thematic session dedicated to sexual pleasure? Well, pleasure is a great reason to have sex; and yet it has been largely ignored in sex education and underrepresented in international development. Only recently, have SRHR organisations and professionals started to recognise the importance of sex positivity to effectively promote sexual health. The Pleasure Project is one of the first to advocate for the inclusion of pleasure in sexuality education and safe sex programmes. Together with Rutgers and Love Matters (RNW Media), they have been taking to several major SRHR happenings around the globe, including ICFP 2018 (watch them [here](#)) and Women Deliver 2019, to draw attention to pleasure and its integration in SRHR activities.

More and more SRHR organisations are becoming inspired by the pleasure movement and Share-Net have taken this opportunity to assess what work has been done and what are the next steps forward.

The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), The Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing (GAB) and The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) are leading the way as they have all *pleasured up* their definitions of sexual health and rights. Furthermore, a quite significant advancement is the working definition of sexual health of the World Health Organisation (WHO), as it now incorporates the “possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences.”

At this interactive session, we discussed questions such as “What does a *pleasured up* world look like for us public health organisations?”, “How can we come together in becoming the pleasure promoters?” We answered these questions by looking at the latest developments, evidence and projects and explore innovative ways to incorporate pleasure in international SRHR policies and practices.



SHARING AND OVERVIEW OF DEFINITIONS

Elsemieke de Jong, RNW Media and Doortje Braeken, Independent consultant

In the last few years the momentum around sexual pleasure has grown, resulting in the inclusion of a sexual pleasure lens into the work of a number of leading SRHR organisations, as well as breaking down the notion that sexual pleasure is a taboo subject. We are now talking more and more about sexual positivity and pleasure, and it's great! The success of the sexual pleasure movement can be seen through the space that it is now inhabiting. An example of such a success, is the variety of sessions organised around pleasure at Women Deliver. In total there were 8 sexual pleasure sessions!

In order to discuss sexual pleasure, it is imperative to put in some ground work and have a good understanding of related definitions. In this session, participants were asked how would they define sexual pleasure and their answers included:

- Consensual
- Sexual activities/ intercourse
- Physical, psychological, well being
- Enjoyment
- Fantasy

Ultimately, sexual pleasure is inevitably entangled with the freedom of choice (and informed consent, of course!) Below are some definitions which were discussed at the interactive session to give a background to sexual pleasure:

- **Sexuality:** *"Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproductions. Sexuality is experienced in thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices and relationships. While sexuality can include all these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced and expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, social economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factor" (WHO, 2006)*
- **Sexual Health:** *Sexual health is 'a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.' (WHO working definition)*
- **Sexual and Reproductive Health:** *Sexual and reproductive health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Therefore, a*

*positive approach to sexuality and reproduction should recognize the part played by **pleasurable sexual relationships**, trust and communication in promoting self-esteem and overall well-being. All individuals **have a right to make decisions** governing their bodies and to access services that support that right. (Guttmacher-Lancet commission, 2018)*

- **Sexual Rights:** *The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others. The application of existing human rights to sexuality and sexual health constitute sexual rights. Sexual rights protect all people's rights to fulfil and express their sexuality and enjoy sexual health, with due regard for the rights of others and within a framework of protection against discrimination." (WHO, 2006, updated 2010)*

Do you have a right to sexual pleasure? Actually, no.

There is currently no right to sexual pleasure. However, it exists as a principle. When organisations are talking about sexual rights, they acknowledge sexual pleasure but it is not considered a human right to be sexually fulfilled. Bearing this in mind, we then have to question whether sexual rights are proactive or reactive. It is currently considered that sexual rights are considered important for people's protection and safety. Sexual rights are more concerned with the "right to prevent" rather than the "right to". Although the right to prevent is a fundamental cornerstone of SRHR, we can't help but wonder what the world would look like if we also considered sexual rights as the "right to".

To try and explore this question further, Durex constructed an independent sexual pleasure working group, known as the Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing (GAB), to see if they could work towards making sexual pleasure a right. The result was the first comprehensive working definition of sexual pleasure:

- **Sexual Pleasure:** "Sexual pleasure is the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from solitary or shared erotic experiences, including thoughts, dreams and autoeroticism.

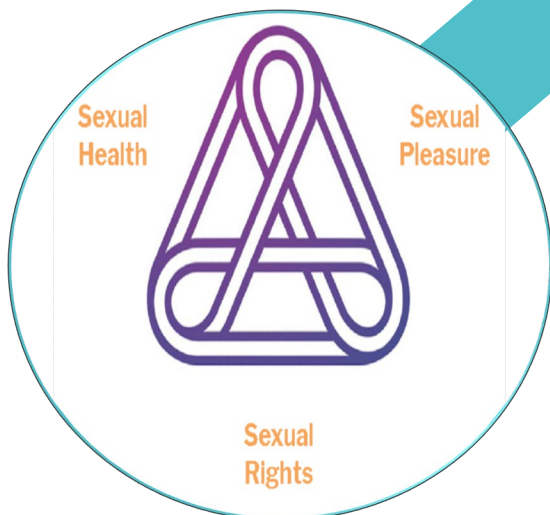
Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are key enabling factors for pleasure to contribute to sexual health and wellbeing. Sexual pleasure should be exercised within the context of sexual rights, particularly the rights to equality and non-discrimination, autonomy and bodily integrity, the right to the highest attainable standard of health and freedom of expression.

The experiences of human sexual pleasure are diverse and sexual rights ensure that pleasure is a positive experience for all concerned and not obtained by violating other people's human rights and wellbeing." (GAB, 2016).

GAB Triangle Approach

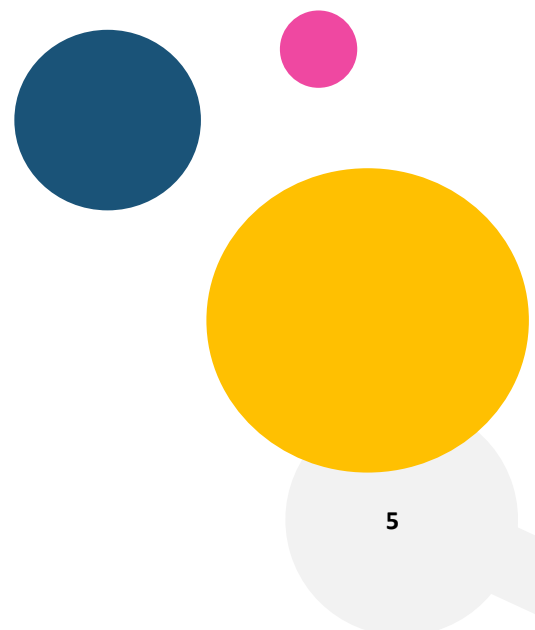
Recently, the Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing (GAB) proposed the “triangle approach” as an innovative conceptual framework which links **Sexual Health, Sexual Rights and Sexual Pleasure**. This framework highlights sexual pleasure as a missing element of the public health agenda, recognises that sexual pleasure is part of sexual health and well-being and also focuses on ethical and sexual justice perspectives. The framework aims to strengthen SRHR policy and programming.

In 2018, the GAB released a toolkit titled “Sexual pleasure: The forgotten link in sexual and reproductive health and rights”, which based on the Triangle Approach.



WAS' Declaration of Sexual Pleasure

Inspired by the work done by GAB, the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) adapted the growing working definition of sexual pleasure in their Declaration on Sexual Pleasure which was developed at the Mexico City World Congress of Sexual Health in October 2019. To read WAS' full declaration, please click [here](#). WAS' Declaration of Sexual Pleasure is critical as it proposes next steps on how to widely integrate sexual pleasure into SRHR and healthcare services. The work put in by both the General Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing and the World Association for Sexual Health are paving the way for more organisations and health professionals to *pleasure* up their work. It is absolutely imperative that SRHR organisations and professionals start to recognise the importance of sex positivity and pleasure in order to effectively promote sexual health. Following on from the definitions of sexual pleasure, the interactive session then turned its focus to how does sexual pleasure work in practice. Here, we spoke about RNW Media's Love Matters project as well as the Pleasure Project to explore how a pleasure based approach works in practice and the value and success of this.





Looking at the Evidence

RNW Media recently commissioned a literature review on the topic of **“Pleasure Approach in Sexuality Education”**. The review highlights key considerations for pleasure-based CSE, shows that research on pleasure is quite limited and that the focus on most research in this area is based on high-income countries. Recommendations which have resulted from the literature review include a comprehensive and diverse research agenda which includes:

- Strong need for impact studies
- Research on perception, expressions and concepts of pleasure
- Research on young people’s experiences

Some of the key findings that were highlighted in the literature review include that consent is key for a successful pleasure based approach, including pleasure into CSE results in higher agency and empowerment in young people, increased use of condoms, family planning as well as a better understanding of HIV and AIDs and finally, if women and girls believe that they are entitled to sexual pleasure then they are more confident in condom negotiating.

*Elsemieke de Jong,
RNW Media*

HOW DOES IT WORK IN PRACTICE? LOOKING AT EXAMPLES OF PLEASURE BASED PROJECTS

Love Matters

Elsemieke de Jong, RNW Media and Charlotte Petty, Love Matters Project Coordinator

Love Matters, which was founded by RNW Media, is a global programme with a cumulative network. The programme is aimed at providing honest and fact based sexual information which young people can easily access online. The Love Matters Global Network is a network of members implementing the Love Matters programme under a shared brand with the goal of ensuring sustained support for young people's sexual health and rights. Love Matters uses a pleasure positive approach to delivering online sex education and this has resulted in them building up a following of 6.5 million facebook fans, 30 million website views and 49 million page views. Through using Google analytics, the Love Matters teams are able to identify which areas of their website their visitors are using and they have found that sexual pleasure related information and content is 1.5 times more popular than sexual education related information across all Love Matters platforms!

The Pleasure Project

Marijke Priester, Rutgers

The Pleasure Project conducted a research, in coordination with Get Up Speak Out, SRHR Alliance Kenya and SRHR Alliance Ghana titled "How to measure pleasure in sexuality education: insights from SRHR programmes in Ghana and Kenya". The research team included young co-researchers and the key research question was "to what extent is CSE under *Get Up Speak Out* programme inclusive of the elements of a sex-positive approach?". The 7 components of the Pleasuremeter (GAB,2018) were used the framework. The findings from the research highlights a number of interesting facts which support the need for inclusion of sexual pleasure education. Findings from the research show that:

- The inclusion of pleasure in sex education leads to more safer sex, self-efficacy, and empowerment among women.
- Sexual pleasure is a highly significant motivating factor for sexual behavior.
- (Young) people all over the world are pursuing sexual pleasure through watching porn.
- Most sex education focuses on delivering safer sex messaging with aim to reduce 'risk taking'
- When partners want to work with a pleasure positive approach, one of the key challenges remaining is *how to*
- When organisations start implementing pleasure positive approaches and measuring impact, we can comment on efficacy

Overall Findings

The overall findings of the research concluded that it is difficult to talk about sexuality explicitly due to conservative socio-cultural and policy contexts. However, there exists positive deviants and that despite the conservative context, it is possible to talk about pleasure. It also concluded that the factors which enable educators to be more sex-positive include: the ability to separate own values and beliefs from facts and young people's realities, seeing or experiencing sexual rights violations or fulfilling sexual encounters, motivation to address young people's realities (teenage pregnancy, sexual activity), several trainings that enable questioning of long-held beliefs and norms, being surrounded by sex-positive people who can be engaged in ongoing dialogue and the Pleasuremeter as its 7 components make 'pleasure' less 'scary' to talk about, making it a very good entry point.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the study include that sex-positive CSE facilitators seem to share certain experiences/ values/ beliefs and so it is important to look for these when selecting new facilitators. It is imperative that all staff and facilitators support the evidence around sex-positive CSE programmes (i.e. that they are more effective than abstinence-based ones). It is also necessary to have more tools to help facilitators gain the language on sex-positivity and pleasure, more discussion on reconciling faith and religious values with CSE values and principle, more focus on gender transformative approaches in the curriculum as well as delivery and more opportunities for sex-positive CSE facilitators to meet like-minded people, discuss issues, and exchange experiences.

INTRODUCING THE PLEASUREMETER: AN INTERACTIVE SESSION TO UNPACK SEXUAL PLEASURE

Doortje Braeken, Independent consultant

There exists a standard set of questions which a health professional may ask you when recording your sexual history. Such standard questions include:

- Number of sexual partners/contacts
- Unprotected vaginal/oral/anal contacts
- Previous STI/HIV tests
- Sexual violence
- Drugs/alcohol and sex
- Abortion
- Sex as a profession

However, questions relating to sexual pleasure are almost never considered. It was with this thought in mind that GAB developed the *Pleasuremeter*, a toolkit based off of their working

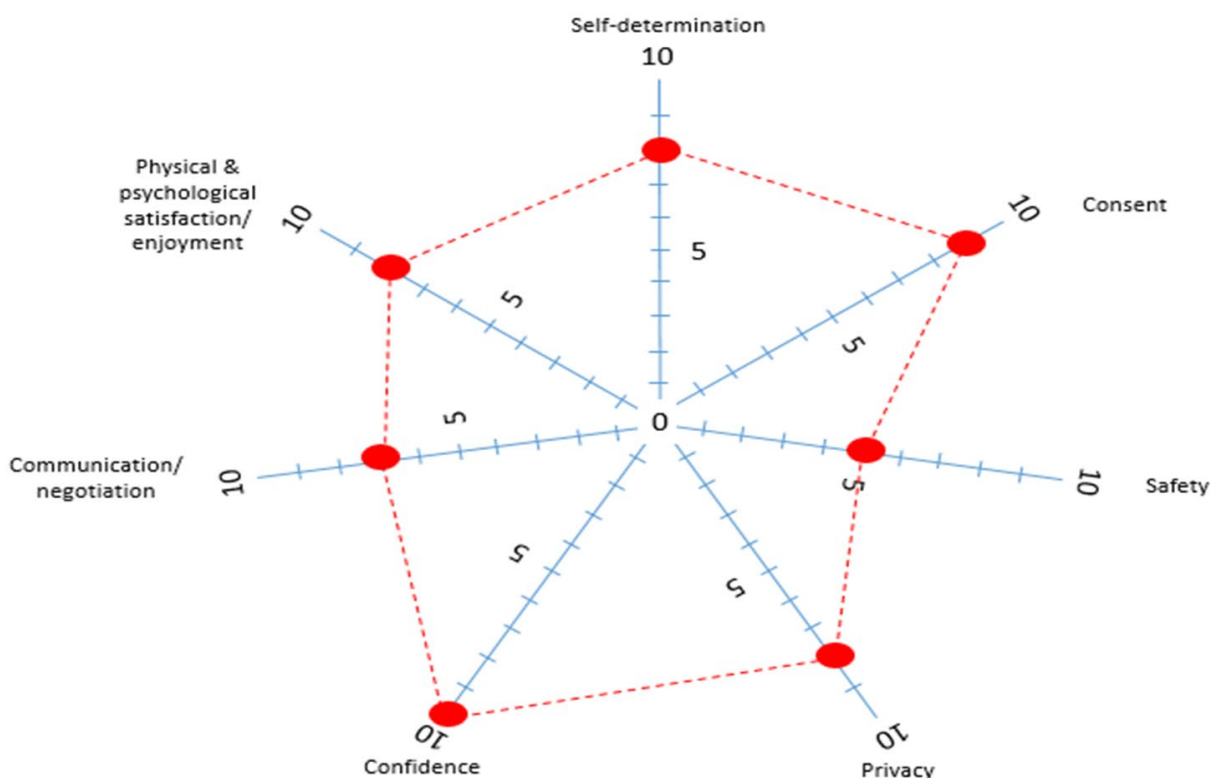
definition of sexual pleasure and their innovative “Triangle Approach” that serves to guide the process of sexual history- taking to include more pleasure related questions. The questions include reporting on 7 factors that contribute to sexual pleasure and wellbeing:

- Emotional/Physical enjoyment
- Self-determination
- Consent
- Safety
- Privacy
- Confidence
- Communication/negotiation

The seven factors just mentioned are used as starting points to discuss with a client what their ideal sexual experiences are. The idea is that the client will score the seven factors in relation to past relationships and experiences of sexual pleasure and well-being. The seven factors can be scored on a scale of 1-10 and open- ended questions can be asked in order to encourage the client.

A spiderweb diagram can then be used as a visual aid for the client (see example below). After the client has reflected and taken time to score the six factors and reflect on past sexual experiences in terms of sexual pleasure and well-being, the health care provider can then discuss each factor individually and gather information about the client’s personal sexual history. The Pleasuremeter can then be used to further prompt the client and get them to reflect more deeply on their ideal sexual experiences based on their scoring of the six factors. You can read more about the pleasuremeter and its usage with this [article](#).

Example of a scoring on a Spiderweb Diagram:



CLOSING REMARKS

This interactive session on Sexual Pleasure is, hopefully, the first of many. Share-Net members had the opportunity to come together to discuss how sexual pleasure can become more incorporated in the work that they do. We delved into what work currently exists around sexual pleasure, looked at the evidence which triumphs the success of including sexual pleasure into CSE programmes and looked at our own work to see how we can better *pleasure* up SRHR policies and practices.

The Share-Net CoP on Sexual Pleasure who organised this meeting are looking for more organisations to join. Should you be interested in joining this CoP, please reach out to us at info@share-net.nl.

Suggested Further Readings:

- Global Advisory Board for Sexual Health and Wellbeing
<https://www.gab-shw.org/>
- World Association for Sexual Health; WAS Declaration Sexual Rights
<https://worldsexualhealth.net/resources/declaration-of-sexual-rights/>
- IPPF :Sexual Rights, a Declaration
<https://www.ippf.org/resource/sexual-rights-ippf-declaration>
- Sexual health, sexual rights and sexual pleasure: meaningfully engaging the perfect triangle. Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters, Volume 27, 2019 - Issue 1: Open Issue
<https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26410397.2019.1593787>
- The Pleasuremeter: exploring the links between sexual health, sexual rights and sexual pleasure in sexual history-taking, SRHR counselling and education, Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters, 27:1, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2019.1690334
<https://tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F26410397.2019.1690334>

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and become part of the knowledge platform on SRHR as either a member or a sponsor. When joining Share-Net, you will not only be contributing to our mission and vision, but you will also be able to enjoy specific member benefits:

- Have free access to all the meetings that we organise. (Non-members participate at cost-price)
- Participate in our working groups or CoPs, which is exclusive for members. These groups are crucial for agenda setting, organizing meetings and executing small research projects. For more information on the Share-Net Netherlands working groups and thematic groups please visit www.share-net.nl/working-groups.
- Be elected in one of our governing bodies, the Steering Committee of the Netherlands or the Board of Share-Net International. All members are invited to our annual business meeting.
- Be eligible for our yearly call for proposals for the Share-Net International Small Grants facility.

For more information about our work and how to get involved. Please contact our Share-Net Netherlands Coordinator, Meike Stieglis at M.Stieglis@kit.nl