

## ORGASM IS GENDERED

a feminist exploration into the (hetero) sexual lives of young  
women

Lorenza Mazzoni



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Firma de aprobación.....

## ABSTRACT

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Italian society is still facing an enormous “orgasm gap” in (hetero) sexual relations: according to a very recent survey (Barbagli and co., 2010) only a minority of women reach an orgasm in every sexual intercourse, in contrast with the vast majority of men; this is true even in the younger generations. I take the lack of orgasm as a starting point for studying how sexual behaviours are still under the reign of patriarchy, imposing male standards that privilege male pleasure at the expense of female. My research therefore aims to analyze from a feminist perspective the agency of young women in reaching an orgasm during a (hetero) sexual relation. Through the use of a “feminist objectivity” and a qualitative methodology I have conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with young women in Bologna, Italy. In particular I have identified a series of widespread social discourse that prevent women from choosing orgasm, while causing them to live their sexuality with high doses of insecurity and inhibition. The lack of sexual knowledge, the taboo of women masturbation, the myth of the vaginal orgasm and the greater recognition of the sexual needs of men contribute to the gendering of orgasm and impede women to live their sexuality freely and satisfactorily.

**Key words:** Sexuality, heterosexuality, orgasm, agency, feminism.

*a L.M.V. y tod@s mis amig@s en este mundo*

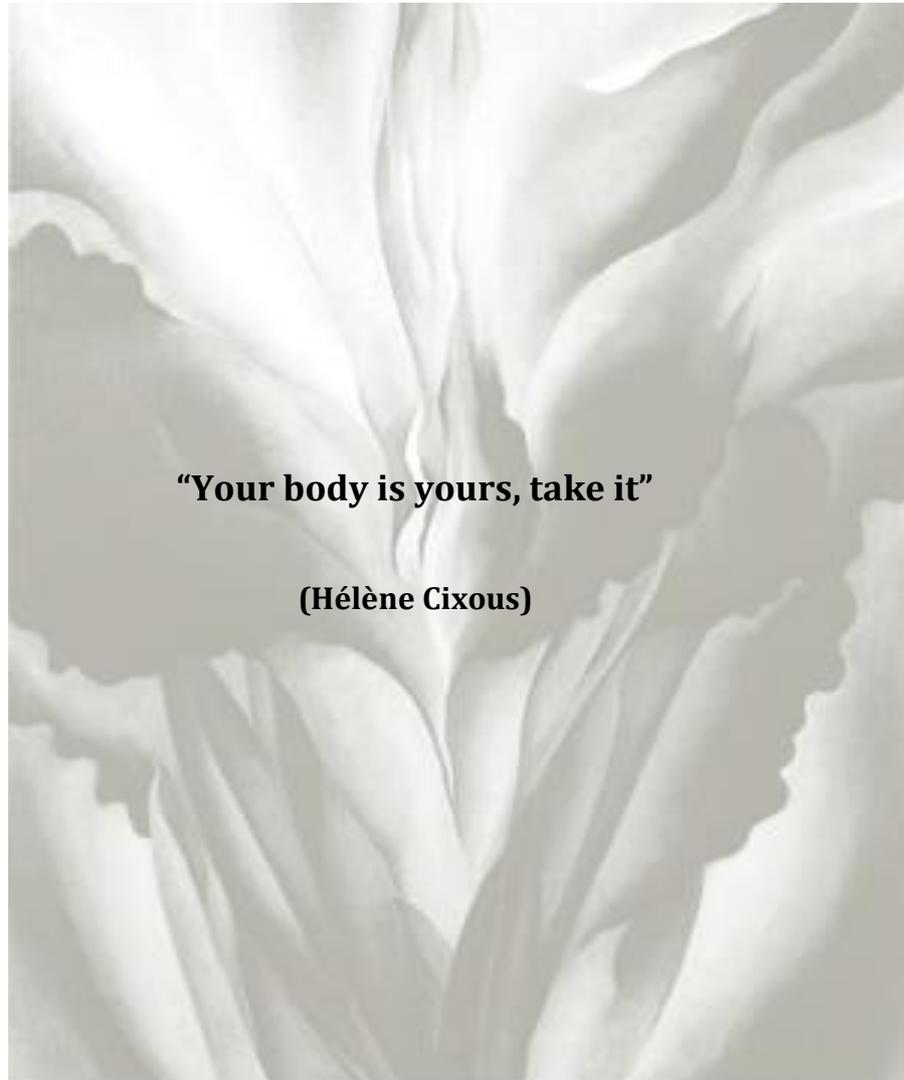


Image of the cover: O'Keeffe, Georgia, 1923. *Red Canna*, Arizona State University Art Museum.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Why is orgasm relevant for the emancipation of women? I do not argue that women should fight for having the same number of orgasms as men; instead I wish to show how the persistence of gendered social discourses produce an inequality between men and women in their possibilities of reaching an orgasm.

Sexuality is still experienced by many women with high doses of insecurity and inhibition, largely due to their gender construction as women. Orgasm is a clear example of this: even now, at our present times, I found the need to tell women that their bodies are not dysfunctional, but that society is. Differences in sexual organs don't mean anything in themselves, but their different representation in society encourages men to be able to use them, while women are discouraged. Therefore even a sphere that is potentially pleasurable and open such as sexuality, becomes a battle ground of (gendered) myths, taboos and false beliefs, still based on male standards that favour men.

In my research I analyze the agency of young women in reaching an orgasm during a (hetero) sexual relation. With "sexual relations" I refer to whatever practice that is incorporated in a sexual exchange between two people, stable or occasional partners; I add "(hetero)" because I am only considering heterosexual sexual relations.

In order to understand which options are available to young women I have looked for the social discourses influencing them and their personal experiences, which I identified through eight interviews I conducted in Bologna, Italy, my hometown. In my study I decided to concentrate on women, but men are of course very present in their accounts. As Joan Scott said in her famous 1986 article, "the

world of women is part of the world of men, created in and by it" (Scott, 1986, p. 1056), revealing that it is impossible to draw the story of just one gender, without taking into consideration the other.

This study takes shape starting from my personal life and it is through the discussions with other women and men in different times and places, that I understood the need to research the subject of sexuality, of extreme importance in many everyday lives. Furthermore another piece of my motivation has been the reading of two recent Italian investigations, which I discovered while writing my final essay for the Noise Summer School, that took place in Granada in August 2010. In particular I have been very shocked by the main data about the numbers of orgasm through intercourse. In 1978 only 26% of Italian women reported reaching always an orgasm in a sexual act (intended as "penis-vagina intercourse"), 43% often, 16% from time to time, 5 % never, 10% do not answer. In addition to this the authors say that there was the possibility that "the research might underestimate the number of female lack of orgasm, due to the ignorance of many women about what the orgasm really is and how it manifest itself"<sup>1</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 206, my translation). The data are still very similar in the 2010 research (34% always, 41% often, 19% from time to time, 4% never, 2% did not answer) (Barbagli and co., 2010), which is even more shocking, apart from the fact that there are more women who declare that they have an orgasm at every sexual relation, and less who do not answer the question. I was utterly surprised that even young women are as present in this (unfortunate)

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<sup>1</sup> "La ricerca sottodimensioni l'entità dell'anorgasmia femminile [I translated "anorgasmia" with "lack of orgasm" since this is the sense the authors give to it], stante appunto l'ignoranza di molte donne su cosa sia realmente e come si manifesti l'orgasmo".

situation, which I originally thought to be outdated. The choice to focus on the target of young women in my research reflects the wish of exploring myself through the stories of others, in fact it is strictly by starting from my own body and my own experience that I wish to give credit to my research (Esteban, 2006).

In agreement with Teresa Ortiz “we have to propose subjects of research that can meet the interests of (many, some, enough) women, in order to be able to enhance their lives and contribute in breaking social and scientific dynamics established and still functioning in our present times”<sup>2</sup> (Ortiz, 2006, p. 49, my translation). Somehow the smiles on the faces of the women interviewed, their gratitude and sense of relief for being able to express their fears and doubts, motivated me even more in the quest for breaking the barriers of (hetero) sexuality.

I divided my research into five main chapters: the revision of the previous works, the objectives, the theoretical framework, the methodology and, finally, the analysis of the discourses emerging from the interviews.

For the revision of the previous works I made a selection of the most important surveys who treated female sexuality and orgasm published during the last 70 years in the Western and Italian context. I will briefly outline the most remarkable considerations in relation to female orgasm of each study, providing evidence of both the innovations they brought, while at the same time the reproduction of some “male

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<sup>2</sup> “Hay que proponer, también, temas de investigación que respondan a intereses de (muchas, algunas, bastantes) mujeres, que sirvan para mejorar sus vidas y que contribuyan a romper dinámicas sociales y científicas establecidas y vigentes en nuestro presente”.

standards". I make a deeper analysis of the two Italian surveys, which enabled me later to make comparison with my own research.

In the objectives I outline clearly the research questions, the aims of my research and the hypothesis, which brought me to structure it in this way.

In order to establish my theoretical framework I proceed in building up my set of definitions which helped me in the development of my arguments. In particular I try to clarify some key concepts, such as gender, sex, sexuality, sexual difference, heterosexuality, clitoral and vaginal orgasms.

Regarding the methodology I outline how I developed my research, such as the use of a "feminist objectivity" and the choices I made in term of a qualitative approach. I provide an exhaustive explanation on how I conducted the interviews and planned their interpretation, through a combination of analysis of the content or of the discourses, depending on the objectives.

Finally in the analysis of the data collected, I first give a comprehensive report of the profiles of the women interviewed, then I make a descriptive study of the sources of information about sexuality that women talked about, and, in the third part, I analyse the experiences of the young women interviewed and the most interesting social discourses that influence their choices in orgasm during a (hetero) sexual encounter.

## 1. REVISION OF PREVIOUS RESEARCHES ON WOMEN'S SEXUALITY (1953-2010)

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Female orgasm has been treated by many disciplines: medicine, history, psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, and sexology. But for a long time the studies turned out to produce mostly myths and false beliefs, a confirmation through the scientific knowledge of the gender structure existing at the time (Laqueur, 1990). Teresa Ortiz argues that “androcentrism affect the scientific method and its application, it has been present in all branches of science and still is”<sup>3</sup> (Ortiz, 2006, p. 42, my translation).

In the revision of the bibliography on sexuality I will focus on three of the most important surveys realized in the Western context and two in the Italian one. These are the researches by Alfred Kinsey (1953), William Masters and Virginia Johnson (1966), Shere Hite (1976), Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis (1978) and Marzio Barbagli and colleagues (2010). The selection I made for the Western surveys is justified by the wide popularity of these works and some fundamental innovation in terms of female orgasm that each of them brought to light. In particular I will approach Kinsey (1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) through the review of some feminist authors, who have unveiled their common use of male standards, in fact “sex research is no more neutral than any other body of knowledge” (Jackson, 1984, p. 45). Hite (1976) serves as a remarkable contrast, being a pioneer feminist research investigating in detail the sexual lives of women from their own point of view.

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<sup>3</sup> “El androcentrismo afecta al método científico y a su aplicación y ha estado y está presente en todas las ramas de la ciencia”.

The decision upon the Italian surveys was taken due to scarcity of sexual research in Italy (Cvajner, 2007), in fact Fabris and Davis (1978) and Barbagli and colleagues (2010) are the only two considerable studies in terms of number of people involved in the last forty years<sup>4</sup>. I will analyze their findings upon women's sexuality and orgasm from a "gender perspective" in order to be able to make comparison with my own research .

### **1.1 KINSEY, MASTERS & JOHNSON AND HITE THROUGH A FEMINIST GAZE**

Alfred Kinsey is considered to be the first researcher to focus on human sexuality and sexual behaviour, from a biological point of view (Cvajner, 2007). In the thirties and forties of the twentieth century he realized his investigations *Sexual behavior in the human male* (1948) and *Sexual behavior in the human female* (1953) by interviewing 12.000 men and women all around the United States; at this time in history this act was very innovative and revolutionary, since sexuality was still seen as something sinful and not worth to be studied scientifically (Cvajner, 2007). It is very interesting to note that he used the method of face to face interviews. In this way Kinsey broke the taboo by treating the subject as normal: in the interviews his team would create a "permissive" atmosphere, to avoid putting any shame or discomfort on the interviewees when talking about any theme (Operto, 2011). Regarding female orgasm he was the first one to consider that the female sexual organ *par excellence*

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<sup>4</sup> In particular there is another quantitative research conducted by Censis, requested by the Institute Pfizer. This could be relevant for the number of people involved through an auto-compiled questionnaire, 1.503, but it could not be taken into account due to the lack of informations about the aim of the research and the methodology (Cvajner, 2007, Vaccaro, 2003).

was the clitoris. He sustained that masturbation was a normal and frequent practice, and that it had no damages for health (Cvajner, 2007); especially he found out that women could masturbate to orgasm within four minutes, reminding us as well that mutual petting “has been a major form of sexuality throughout time and is prevalent also in the animal kingdom” (Hite, 2006, p. 50). But next to these great innovation, he still saw the penis-vagina intercourse as the most important act, and the chapter on female orgasm focus mostly on “whether or not women are able to have orgasm during coitus” (Hite, 2006, p. 56): his conclusion is merely that women who have been married for a longer time have a better percentage of orgasms (Hite, 2006). So even though his work is in some parts challenging the present society and promoting an expansion of the possibilities of sexuality, his analysis still takes for granted some male-standard and sees women as dysfunctional when they cannot reach an orgasm through penetration (Hite, 2006).

In 1966 William Masters and Virginia E. Johnson published their volume *Human Sexual Response*. They transformed sex research by transporting it to a laboratory where “they observed and measured sexual activity directly, later applying their findings in their own sex therapy programme” (Jackson, 1984, p. 43). One of the most interesting aspects of their research is about the four phases of the sexual encounter, the last one being the reaching of an orgasm: this is considered to be the “normal” sexual act, strongly reducing the view on sexuality and raising orgasm as the ultimate goal to reach at every sexual encounter (Lonzi, 1977). Next to this orgasm-centric view, Masters and Johnson have recognized the importance of the clitoris for women’s sexuality, in particular proving in the laboratory that it is the organ which has the more

nerve endings in the whole female body, unmasking the vaginal orgasm myth, since all orgasms start from the clitoris (Lonzi, 1977). However next to this fundamental finding, their views and aims were strongly linked to the improvement of heterosexual penis-vagina intercourse, in this perspective when choosing the women for their study they dismissed those who were “unable to respond sexually”, meaning that they couldn’t have an orgasm during the penis-vagina intercourse (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). Therefore this meant completely distorting the results since it was aimed to represent the entire population, as Leonor Tiefer humoristically wrote “as research on human singing behaviour by using the Metropolitan Opera Singers as a sample” (Tiefer, 1995, cited in Vanwesenbeeck, 2009, p. 123). Due to this erroneous starting point, the important findings on the clitoris did not change the expectations for women to orgasm during intercourse, in fact they continued to believe that “a ‘normal’ woman should get enough ‘indirect’ clitoral stimulation from simple intercourse (coitus) to lead to orgasm” (Hite, 2006, p. 56). Finally this cemented the idea that if a woman needed (extra) manual stimulation she was “dysfunctional” (Hite, 2006).

The *Hite Report* (1976), came at this moment with the brilliant intention of investigating in details how women felt and experienced orgasm and sexuality, instead of imposing them the “normality” or abnormality of their experiences. Shere Hite, at the time a young researcher, decided to collect women’s accounts of their sexuality and sexual life, in order to be able to study their perception of it, providing evidence of both the similarities and the differences of every single story. In Shere Hite’s words: “its purpose was to avoid, insofar as possible, setting up rigid new ‘norms’ which might seem to be telling women what they should feel, and instead, to give women a chance

to re-examine and re-evaluate their lives, deciding for themselves how they felt, what they agreed and disagreed with" (Hite, 2006, p. 61). So her work now constitutes one of the most important shared sexual knowledge through the words of women for women. Regarding orgasm she reported in details the wide variety of techniques through which women would masturbate, without anybody teaching them. She demonstrated how the majority of women can successfully bring themselves to orgasm through self stimulation any time they want, since they are the ones who regulate their stimulation; for many women "masturbation" equals orgasm, as much as for the majority of men interviewed in the Italian survey of 2010 "intercourse" equals orgasm (Barbagli and co., 2010). So where is the problem in the equation? Why is the capacity of orgasm lost during sex with a partner? She simply argues that the problem is in the stimulation, or the techniques used by women when alone differing greatly from the stimulation offered in the penis-vagina intercourse. In her words: "it is not the female sexuality that has a problem ('dysfunction') but society that has a problem in its definition of sex and the subordinate role that definition gives women" (Hite, 1976, p. 55). In fact due to the construction of femininity, masculinity and heterosexual intercourse, women are not likely to use the knowledge discovered with masturbation when with a partner. In addition to this due to the coitus imperative they are not likely to receive an adequate stimulation, which Shere Hite explains with a clever parallel: if men were stimulated from the scrotus, which is near the male zone of pleasure but not completely in it, then they surely would take a longer time to come (Hite, 1976). This happens with purely "vaginal stimulation", which for most women is not likely to bring to orgasm, since it is far from the real peak of pleasure, the clitoris. Even language perpetuates the ignorance about female important sexual zones, in fact

the stimulation of the clitoris does not have a name, and it is generally perceived as an extra activity, not as important as the intercourse. Her conclusion is that the definition of sex should change in order to expand its possibilities, and include mutual stimulations which favour women's orgasms (Hite, 1976).

The main weakness in the previous researches was actually the research question "Why aren't women having orgasms from intercourse?", while in fact the real mystery should be "*Why have we insisted women should orgasm from intercourse?*" (Hite, 1976, p. 236). The *Hite Report* demonstrates through the accounts of women that, even though they might like coitus, in order to reach an orgasm the majority of them need some "specific stimulation of their exterior clitoral area", so "looking objectively at women, one could see that if they could orgasm easily during one form of stimulation but not another, this did not mean there was 'something wrong with them' it meant (using scientific standards) that having orgasm in that way was normal for the human female" (Hite, 2006, p. 58).

Nevertheless, although Shere Hite confirmed the persistence of the still androcentric gaze hiding in the research by Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, the knowledge she produced is still mostly unknown by the wide public. In 1970 Anne Koedt wrote: "There is no ignorance on the subject. There are, however, social reasons why this knowledge has not been popularized. We are living in a male society which has not sought change in women's role".

## **1.2 A COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO ITALIAN SURVEYS (1978-2010)**

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The researches I considered for the Italian context are *Il mito del sesso: rapporto sul comportamento sessuale degli italiani* (1978) and *La sessualità degli Italiani* (2010). I will first present the methodology used in each research, and then confront their approaches and conclusions about women's orgasm.

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### **1.2.1 Methodology and aim of the researches**

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The first important research conducted in Italy on a relevant number of people is the one by Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis, published in 1978. It involved 2 000 subjects between 18 and 64 years old distributed over the whole national territory. The methodology used was structured on two different questionnaires: one about general opinions, values and morals which was asked directly by an interviewer; and a more intimate one involving specific questions on sexual behaviours that was auto-compiled by the interviewees, while the interviewer was present in order to guarantee the individuality of the answers. An innovation of the Italian research was the choice of having female interviewer for female interviewees, and male interviewer for male interviewees. This was meant to establish a better confidentiality between the two (Fabris and Davis, 1978). This approach, of course due to the innovation of the study and the consequent need of caution, forcibly impeded the fluidity of the answers, since the questions were formulated by the researchers following a series of hypothesis, which could not be adjusted in the moment of the interview.

I believe this research was conducted while still on the wave of the "sexual revolution", which infuriated in the late seventies in Italy. In fact the authors claimed

the quest of knowledge about the sexual behaviour of Italian people as a crusade against ignorance. This because the condition experienced by the majority of the interviewees could be defined without any doubts as “sexual misery” (Cvajner, 2007). Since sexual liberation is considered by the authors as fundamental step towards social emancipation, so this research was compelled with strong political objectives, and was expecting moral critics next to methodological/scientific ones (Cvajner, 2007). In the research there is a remarkable effort made to contextualize every result within the context of the Italian culture, emphasizing its patriarchal aspect. This was probably due to the women’s studies background of one of the authors, Rowena Davis, formed in the UK (Fabris and Davis, 1978). I found the research uniquely innovative due to its clarity and depth in explaining the phenomenon presented.

More than thirty years later a new research of comparable importance was brought forward in Italy. *La sessualità degli Italiani*, published in 2010, was based on two quantitative researches and a qualitative one. It was financed by the Ministry of the University and the Research (Prin) and other public institutions such as the region Emilia-Romagna and Istat (Barbagli and co., 2010). The first quantitative research was conducted on 3.058 Italian citizens between 18 and 69 years old, and then the second quantitative one regarded 4.341 people corresponding to the same criteria of the previous one, which means that the total number of people interviewed through questionnaire was finally 7.399. The methodology was similar to the one used in 1978: the interviewers were of the same sex of the interviewees, and the questionnaire was in part compiled through direct question-answer, while the most “intimate” parts were compiled by the interviewees alone. Finally the third research, qualitative, involved

120 people between 18 and 69 years of age, and this was done through semi-structured in-depth interviews regarding their whole sexual life (Barbagli and co., 2010). The aims of Barbagli and colleagues seem to be less political than the 1978 one, probably due to a change in the historical moment and in the interest for sexuality; the aims explained are two: “to provide a detailed description of the feelings, behaviours and the sexual identities of the Italian people”<sup>5</sup> (Barbagli and co., p. 10, my translation) and “to investigate and explain the changes that happened in the sexual culture of our country through the 20<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>6</sup> (Barbagli and co., p. 10, my translation). It is a purely academic research, which has no aim of reaching the more general public and informing them in order to enhance their lives. On the contrary Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis wished as well to divulgate the acquired knowledge about the recent researches on sexuality to all those who would read the research. This means that they did not want only to draw results upon the situation, but as well to inform people, share the sexual knowledge available, not only in a historical way, but in a practical one as well. In the research of 2010 this aspect is left out, and I regard this as an enormous pity since, as we will see, the population still needs to be informed, in order to open new possibilities of sexualities.

The major difference between these two researches can be found in their use of “experience”, which I recall as fundamental<sup>7</sup>: while Fabris and Davis (1978) take the experiences collected as a starting point for researching why it is so, contextualizing

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<sup>5</sup> “Fornire una descrizione dettagliata dei sentimenti, dei comportamenti e delle identità sessuali degli italiani”.

<sup>6</sup> “Ricostruire e spiegare I mutamenti che, nel corso del Novecento, ha conosciuto la cultura sessuale del nostro paese”.

<sup>7</sup> See the paragraph 4.5.2 “The meaning of experience”.

them, Barbagli and colleagues (2010) seem to use the experiences as truth, or evidence which naturalize the behaviours reported. As a consequence, even though the results in terms of numbers are quite similar, the explanations are very different.

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### **1.2.2 The coitus imperative and the hierarchy of orgasms**

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In both Italian researches of 1978 and 2010, as in those of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, the data available focus primarily on the orgasm reached through “coitus”, as if it was the most important (and legitimate) one. In fact the 2010 research does not furnish data on the incidence of orgasm in individual/mutual masturbation, or oral stimulations; as well it is not explained how the “sexual act” works, for example in matter of positions and possible combined stimulations, such as the manual stimulation of the clitoris. I consider this a significant regression, compared to the research of 1978, where the authors go into depth in dismantling the myth of the coitus as the only way in which sex can be expressed. Fabris and Davis show that the most used position is the man on top of the woman, since it is considered the most “normal” one, but it is far the most pleasurable for both partners (Fabris and Davis, 1978); in fact it is the one where the man is considered active/dominant, so it is the favourite of most men, but on the other hand “in sexology there is consensus in affirming that the indirect stimulation of the clitoris operated through this position in coitus is often inadequate in bringing women to orgasm”<sup>8</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 177, my translation). The authors argue that the manual or oral stimulations are more

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<sup>8</sup> “In sessuologia, una larga concordanza nell’affermare che la stimolazione indiretta della clitoride effettuata con questa posizione di coito sia spesso insufficiente per procurare l’orgasmo alla donna”.

likely to bring women to orgasm, but they are not usually practiced due to “the harsh interdictions concerned with any deviation from the stereotype of normality inhibit a freer expression of sexuality”<sup>9</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978., p. 221, my translation).

Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis in their chapter about orgasm try to contextualize the female orgasm in its many aspects: the most influential one being the Italian culture which still impose a “biological” model of sexuality, limiting the normal sexual act to coitus, depriving female orgasm of its importance since it is (represented as) not needed for the reproduction. So the coitus imperative, the positions deemed “normal” of it and the non popularity of the other practices contributes in privileging the male orgasm upon the female (Fabris and Davis, 1978). Also, female sexuality has been inscribed with guilt and shame, which has of course influenced the sexual response of women in matter of knowledge about one’s own body and her possibility of action/proposition, having a decisive influence on their capacity of having an orgasm (Fabris and Davis, 1978). So the differences between men and women in orgasm are mostly explained in the current cultural model, where the male orgasm is seen as necessary (for reproduction), bringing a legitimization and normalization of the positions and practices which are more likely to bring him to orgasm. Fabris and Davis contextualize the female orgasm and the lack or orgasm, looking for historical explanation, instead of natural differences between men and women.

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<sup>9</sup> “I pesanti divieti relativi a una qualsiasi deviazione dallo stereotipo di normalità inibiscono ad una più libera espressione della sessualità”.

Very differently the Italian research of 2010 doesn't distinguish at all between the present and the history of male and female orgasms, since they seem to assume that all orgasms must be through penis-vagina intercourse, as they are for the majority of men. They are still applying male canons to women, so they do not seem to consider that for women there are different forms in which they are more likely to reach orgasm. The researchers put the focus on the difference of the "language" used by the men and women interviewed, which should reveal a difference in thinking: while for man pleasure equals orgasm (and equals coitus), for women seem to be something more mental than physical (Barbagli and co., 2010). For men this is a natural act, coming from instincts, while for women it is something to be learned and indisputably more complicated (Barbagli and co., 2010). Again this assumption does not clarify whether they refer to every kind of orgasm that a woman can reach, or just the orgasm through coitus. The difference in this is crucial, because thanks to Kinsey (1953) and Hite (1976), as we have seen, it has clearly been demonstrated that in masturbation women reach orgasms as quickly and efficiently as men, for some even since childhood without anybody teaching them. So are the authors of the research of 2010 still making a sort of hierarchy of orgasms where orgasm reached through manual or oral stimulations, or by themselves are not even considered? For example in the research of 2010 the authors are (still) saying that women takes more time than men to reach an orgasm (Barbagli and co., 2010) , but they do not say in which situations it is so and for which reasons.

While the research of 1978 recognizes the importance of a correct stimulation, often lacking, in order to reach an orgasm, the one of 2010 doesn't, as if assuming

(once again) that all women should have orgasms through intercourse without any “extra-help”.

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### **1.2.3 Lack of orgasm VS anorgasmia, male orgasm VS female pleasure**

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Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis are very careful to clarify that those women who never or rarely have an orgasm are not “frigid”, which is a condition where the sexual answer is totally absent, as well in the phases preceding the orgasm, such as excitation (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 208). Of course “frigid” no longer has the meaning of those women who do not have a “vaginal orgasm”, as was considered by Freud and his followers<sup>10</sup>. Anorgasmia in the sense of women who don’t reach an orgasm, are defined here as those women who are sexually excited, reach the “plateau” phase, but then do not reach the following phase, the orgasm. But the authors add that it is not unusual that women who do not reach an orgasm in a sexual relation might reach it alone when masturbating (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 208). So they conclude “anorgasmia has nearly in all cases, a socio-cultural reason, and has to be considered first as the product of the sexual repression, which has always had women as the favourite target. On the one hand resulting in a stronger inhibition about everything concerning sex, as well as a widespread ignorance about her own sexual physiology and the mechanisms of orgasm, on the other hand always

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<sup>10</sup> A contemporary follower of Freud’s ideas in 1953 wrote: “whenever a woman is incapable of achieving an orgasm via coitus, provided the husband is an adequate partner, and prefers clitoral stimulation to any other form of sexual activity, she can be regarded as suffering from frigidity and requires psychiatric assistance.” (Caprio,1953, p.64.).

subordinating her sexuality to the male”<sup>11</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 77, my translation). As we can see the authors treat anorgasmia/lack of orgasm as a totally social problem, stressing a number of cultural factors historically influencing more a woman than a man, on the one hand of “sexual inhibition”, on the other on lack of the correct stimulation.

This same approach does not happen in the research of 2010, in fact Barbagli and colleagues talk about those women who don’t reach orgasms as affected by “anorgasmia” without any further questioning of it. The emphasis is placed on the different vision of “pleasure” and “orgasm” of women and men. The author of the chapter Martina Cvajner shows from the quantitative results and the analysis of the interviews that there is a radical difference between men and women in their perception of pleasure, instead of the stimulation needed. So for men a sexual encounter means three phases: “sexual arousal, penetration, ejaculation (which is identified with orgasm)”<sup>12</sup> (Cvajner, 2010, p. 237, my translation), while for women “the phase of the sexual arousal, the pleasurable experience of the intercourse and, in some cases, the reaching of the orgasm”<sup>13</sup> (Cvajner, 2010, p. 238, my translation). Again the dynamics of the sexual encounter are not even questioned, and the different stimulation it provides for men and women not even mentioned. The authors draw a

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<sup>11</sup> “L’anorgasmia ha quindi, nella quasi totalità dei casi, una matrice socioculturale, ed è da considerarsi *in primis* come prodotto della repressione sessuale che ha sempre avuto come bersaglio elettivo la donna. Sia nel senso di una maggiore inibizione per tutto ciò che concerne il sesso, e quindi anche di una diffusa ignoranza sulla sua fisiologia sessuale e sui meccanismi di orgasm, sia subordinando la sua sessualità a quella del maschio”.

<sup>12</sup> “L’eccitamento, la penetrazione, l’ejaculazione (identificata con l’orgasmo)”.

<sup>13</sup> “La fase di eccitamento, l’esperienza piacevole del rapporto e, in certi casi, il raggiungimento dell’orgasmo”.

conclusion on the different nature of men and women. While for men “pleasure” and “orgasm” are the same thing, visible through “ejaculation”, for women are two separate entities, the “orgasm” being “optional” (Cvajner, 2010, p. 238-239). But can we say that it is an option because they chose it consciously or just because they don’t have the cultural instrument for expecting something else?

The Italian research of 2010 seems to be very immature in its recounting of women’s experience, since they are still assuming coitus as the most relevant expression of sexuality and consider “anorgasmic” those women who cannot reach an orgasm through coitus. At some point they do write: “It is interesting to note how women who manifest a wide variety of desires (in the forms of sexual practices they find attractive, even though they did not necessarily experiment with them) and of experimented sexual practices are the ones who say they have orgasms with some regularity” (Barbagli and co., 2010, p.240-241, my translation). Unfortunately this point is not developed. This picture would be very similar to the one depicted by Shere Hite (1976), she argued that the major difficulty for women to reach an orgasm mirrors only the major difficulty for women to be correctly stimulated by their partner.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

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### **MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

Is reaching an orgasm a possibility (between others) for young women in a (hetero) sexual relation? Is orgasm gendered?

### **RELATED QUESTIONS:**

What is pleasure and what is orgasm for young women? Does orgasm change or have to be negotiated when women participate in a (hetero) sexual relation? Do women have the cultural instruments for choosing an orgasm in the sexual act if they want to? Can we call it a conscious choice or rather an adaptation? Which kind of social discourses are influencing their choices, directing them toward certain options instead of others? Why are some non-pleasurable options in reality the most used/rewarded? Which are the current discourses which inhibit women toward the attainment of pleasure and orgasm in a (hetero) sexual relation?

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Find out the sources of information about sexuality/orgasm available to the young women interviewed and the type of knowledge they provided.
2. Identify those social discourses that most influence young women's experiences about orgasm, especially those preventing them from choosing orgasm.

## **HIPOTHESIS**

- 1.** The sexual knowledge available to young women is more based on myths and morals, than practical information about sexual practices or even basic erogenous zones.
- 2.** When women masturbate know how to have an orgasm and choose when to have it, while when they enter a (hetero) sexual relation they negotiate their own orgasm, but always maintain the obligation of the male partner's orgasm.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Before being able to start my research I figured out I had to build up my own set of definitions, in particular regarding some controversial concepts that are still a matter of debate in feminist academics. So in this chapter I tried to make head of some key concepts, such as gender, sex, sexuality, heterosexuality, which will be fundamental in the development of my research.

#### 3.1 GENDER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEX

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“Only our beliefs about gender –not science- can define our sex. Furthermore our beliefs about gender affect what kind of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 3).

The concepts of “gender” and “sex” have been fundamental for the development of Second Wave feminist theories. They have long been seen as opposites with gender representing culture, a construction, while sex being part of biology, or nature. So while sex had to do with anatomy, gender was found in the social forces which influence the behaviours (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Gender was supposedly changing depending on time and place, while sex was defined as unchangeable, outside the parameters of history (Ortiz, 2006). As Anne Fausto-Sterling suggests this distinction became very dangerous since it maintained the idea of a radical biological difference between men and women, and left open the possibility of

claiming inequality as a natural state of things. Luckily feminist scientists have long produced material to show the male gaze in science, and the non-objectivity of empirical sciences such as medicine and biology. In fact it has been demonstrated how the categories such as sex, body or sexuality are not a-historical and a-temporal, but are very connected with the concept of gender, they mutually influence and modify each other (Ortiz, 2006).

“It is a dialectic non-hierarchical connection in which sex, body and the sexual differences influence or affect the gender relations or identities , while at the same time the gender system affect the construction of sex, body and its differences<sup>14</sup>” (Ortiz, 2006, p. 40, my translation).

In the gender system it is, of course, comprised science, whose look on the human beings is affected by the current gender beliefs. So this idea of binary opposition between gender-sex has been dismissed, privileging a radical social constructionist approach, since “almost everything one wants to say about sex – however sex is understood- already has in it a claim about gender” (Laqueur, 1990, p.11). A clear demonstration of the changes that happened in the mutable scientific concept of “biological sex” is given by Thomas Laqueur (1990) in his historical account of the epistemological passage from a one-sex model to a two-sex model; this happened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Western philosophy and science. In the previous model male and female were considered as having the same sexual composition, meaning that

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<sup>14</sup> “Se trata de una ligazón dialéctica, no jerárquica, en la que el sexo, el cuerpo y las diferencias sexuales condicionan o afectan a las relaciones e identidades de género, pero también el sistema de género afecta a la construcción del sexo, el cuerpo y sus diferencias”.

women had exactly the same sexual organs as men, but they were internal, inverted and less perfect. In the second model the differences become radical and they involve all spheres of human nature: body and soul, physical and moral. Laqueur suggests that the gender structure that was already existing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century influenced the search for biological explanations and this explains the similarity between the “official” biological differences and the different behaviours (or roles) of men and women (Laqueur, 1990, p. 30). It is then possible to say that the choice of privileging the theory of a radical difference between the sexes, instead of the similarities, was a political one (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Until recently sexes have been defined mostly by the external and internal sexual organs, but the inadequacy of a two-sexes system has been demonstrated in many cases, the most horrifying being the sex-tests which are imposed on athletes in order to determine whether they can compete in the category “male” or “female”. In fact the example of Caster Semenya, the south-african athlete, whose sex was so hard to define, throws light on a new aspect of the question: sex is a very complicated aspect of humans, and has to be looked into more profoundly than simply observing aspects of the genitals, which is the only aspect scrutinized when a baby is born (Dreger, 2010). Some recent theories considers that there are at least seven stages in a “normal” male and female differentiation, or for a human being in order to be considered a man or a woman. For Mary Crawford and Rhoda Unger (2000) there are 5 types of sex (which correspond to the first five stages): chromosomal (XX or XY), gonadal (ovaries or testes), hormonal (estrogens or androgens), the sex of the internal accessory organs (fallopian tubes and uterus, or vas deferens and seminal vesicles) and

the sex of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minoris and the vaginal orifice, or penis and scrotum). Then there are the two last stages: labelling the sex at birth (male or female), and its connection to a gender (feminine or masculine), which will influence the socialization of an individual (Crawford and Unger, 2000, p. 153). The interesting thing is that in each of these phases there might be a variation, which makes it very hard to decide for just one of the two-sexes possibility.

Sex is therefore a very controversial issue, and more refined studies are looking for more refined ways of dividing humanity into two. But it seems that the further inside the human body scientists go, the more difficult is to follow with the legitimization of the existence of two opposite sexes. All this frenetic research for finding new evidences for the sexual division into two can be seen as a last attempt of science for keeping the categories male and female, despite the growing evidences that it is not that easy. Despite this enormous and very complicated debate, in our society and everyday life, sex is mostly defined only in terms of the external genitals and it is attributed at birth, or even prenatal time, together with the gender, influencing the spaces of our growth. Most people will have no idea about their hormonal or gonadal sex until they are forced to do exams for various reasons, such as an important sport competition. However the majority will probably never question the sex/gender assigned at birth.

Some feminists and non-feminists scientists have criticised the tendency of forgetting the “material body” (Butler, 1993). Even though I recognize the possibility that real physiological differences might strongly influence a person’s experience of gender and sexuality (Fausto-Sterling, 2000), I believe that a clear cut distinction of

gender and sex (in the sense of material body) is impossible to find, as well as the binary oppositions such as the nature/nurture, or mind/body: “Human are biological and thus in some sense natural beings *and* social, and in some sense artificial – or, if you will, constructed entities” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 25). This approach is taken by the developmental system theory, which argues that we are at the same time natural and unnatural, without possibility of separating them (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

### **3.2 SEXUAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN**

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In my thesis I will maintain the categories of men and women, as symbols which still work in our society and they become part of our everyday life/experience, influencing as well one’s own perception of the body and sex. I argue that ideally the two-sexes models should be abandoned, but for the moment people are formed to think in these terms. So the persons I interviewed have been attributed the gender/sex “women” at birth and still identify themselves as so, without any questioning of it.

In this research the only “sexual difference” –or better bodily difference- I allow is in terms of the external genitalia, which will influence a certain vision of one’s own body, pleasure and erotic zones. My point is not about the differences of sexual organs in itself, in fact I will mostly consider and analyze the differences *in behaviour* due to the *perception* of possession of “male” or “female” external organs. This is of course due to the different social value attributed to them, as I will explain later in the chapter. In fact I argue that it is not the possession of a “penis” which makes it universally easier to have an orgasm: notwithstanding their real pleasurable zones, men generally learn how to enjoy (some of) their external organs, while women are

socialized to become afraid of their own bodies, they are exposed to pressure and guilt for discovering what they like, and finally this results in lack of knowledge/confidence regarding their own body. The sexual organ in itself does not mean anything, but society construct a gendered way of learning (or not) how to use them, which creates an enormous difference in behaviours and limits the sexual practices to the ones which are likely to be pleasurable for those who have a penis. This is the intricate link between physical body and gender, impossible to separate.

I argue that every person should be comfortable with their own bodies and be able to discover it, alone or with one (or more) partner(s). Then sexual difference –or bodily differences- or external sexual organs will not matter, nobody will tell you whether you should enjoy more your clitoris or your vagina, you should discover it by yourself. For this reason it is fundamental to advocate for the discovery of the whole body (not only the genitals) in order to be able to enjoy it. Each body is different, each body should be lived in a pleasurable way. As well I do not want to essentialise the category of “woman” by saying that there is a female nature and a female way of reaching an orgasm. Or that the female sexual organ is the clitoris, since pleasure mostly derives from it. The *Hite Report* showed in 1976 the importance of the variety of women’s experiences. Here I recall the definition by Kate Borenstein of sexual pleasure as “doing it, any way ya do it, by yourself or with another or others, with or without any implements, with or without love, with or without consent” (Borenstein, 1998, p.27).

### 3.3 GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY

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Gender is still a very important category of study for feminists, which cannot be abandoned for the moment. This permits us to focus our research on the “constitutive element of social relationships based on *perceived* differences between the sexes” (Scott, 1986, p. 1067) and their consequent relationships of power. At the same time it is very important to remember that gender cannot be the only parameter of research, since it is always intertwined with other important “axes of signification” such as “‘race’/ethnicity, class, sexuality and nation” (Lutz, 2002 cited in Wekker, 2004, p. 496). In particular in sex research become very important other factors such as: educational level, religious affiliation, and age (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009).

As well I would like to cite here a simple definition of “gender” (selected from the many available), which I recall being useful when taking into account its everyday experience by actual people. Gender is formed in the lives of persons by several aspects: gender assignment, gender role, gender identity, gender attribution (Ahmed, Morrison, Hughes, 2004). The assignment happens at birth (or even before) and is determined depending on the presence of a penis or a vagina; it will be written on your certificate of birth and it will commonly be referred as your sex. The role is “society’s expectations of how male or females should behave” (Ahmed, Morrison, Hughes, 2004, p. 847), while the gender identity is the personal perception of one’s own gender compared to the societal possibilities of male or female gender roles. Most people assume the gender they are assigned without asking themselves whether they are a man or a woman. The women I interviewed did not express any doubt about their sense of belonging to womanhood. Gender attribution is the way in which people learn to understand whether the person in front of them is male or female, this

traditionally include “clothing, mannerisms, physical appearance, gait, and occupational choice” (Ahmed, Morrison, Hughes, 2004, p. 847).

### **3.4 GENDERED SEXUALITY**

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Is sexuality about gender or sex or both? Is sexuality instinct or cultural? Is it about reproduction or pleasure? Is it fixed or fluid? Is sexuality just about sexual acts?

First I would like to say that I believe that sexuality is a sphere in which we can consolidate our self-image and gain self confidence (Katchadourian, 1990). It is crucial to stress that sexuality is an essential part of human development, and is not limited to sexual intercourse, but covers a wide range of behaviours, personal expression and communication (Arnett, 2004). In fact sexuality is a broader term referring to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships and identities. This definition in its broader sense assumes fluidity, since what is sexual (erotic) is not (universally) fixed but depends on what is socially defined as such and these definitions are contextually and historically variable. "What is sexual in a context may not be so in another: an experience becomes sexual by the application of socially learned meanings" (Caplan, 1989, p. 2), hence sexuality has potentially no clear boundaries, but they are actually formed in different ways in each society, limiting in practice its free expression (ex. taboos, shame, repugnance for certain body parts or sexual practice). This means that sexuality has a space, time, body, gender, sexual organs and sexual practices. It has to be contextualized in its many aspects. For example sexuality in our Western world is recognized only in adults: the masturbation of children is still a big taboo.

Michel Foucault (1978) has contributed in dismantling the presumed naturalness and immutability of sexuality by recounting its history, or its evolution in the Western world, defining it as a social construction, which means historically and culturally contingent instead of biologically determined. As well anthropology has been very important in showing different sexual practices all around the world: "cross-cultural comparison may serve to reassure us that everything is normal -somewhere in the world" (Caplan, 1989, p. 11). Later feminists such as Lucy Bland followed Foucault's reflection while taking into account "one of the central aspects of the historical construction of sexuality, namely its construction as gender specific" (Bland, 1981 cited in de Lauretis, 1987, p. 14). This means that male and female sexuality were not constructed in the same way, through time, in particular sexuality plays a specific part in the definition of femininity and masculinity.

A clear example of the constructed component of sexuality is the evolution throughout the last two centuries of the interpretation of female sexuality. Thomas Laqueur recounts that a change happened in medicine, biology and science when it was discovered that the female orgasm was not necessary for reproduction: women did not even need to be awake or conscious in order to get pregnant (Laqueur, 1990). This fact opened the possibility of female passivity and female "passionlessness" (Laqueur, 1990). While in antiquity women were considered sexual being *par excellence*, creatures of lust whose desire would never be completely satisfied, they were then turned into beings insensitive to the pleasures of the flesh, who long for relationships instead of sex (Laqueur, 1990). So at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the presence or lack of orgasm was considered part of the sexual difference between males and females; to use a very vocative expression by Françoise Basch what

happened was "the mutation of the Eve myth into the Mary myth" (Basch, 1974, p. 9). This new representation fit with the two-sexes model, and the polarity of male and female in all areas was constructed in sexuality as well. So: "within 'common sense', male and female sexuality stand as distinct: male sexuality is understood as active, spontaneous, genital, easily aroused by 'objects' and fantasy, while female sexuality is thought of in terms of its relation to male sexuality, as basically expressive and responsive to the male" (Bland, 1981 cited in de Lauretis, 1987, p. 14).

In the Western society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century another important component of sexuality is its classification into "sexual orientation", such as heterosexual or homosexual (etcetera..), which will form part of our gendered identity. Even though this might seem "logic", several anthropological researches have demonstrated that it is not the case in all societies. For example Gloria Wekker studied the Afro-Surinamese society in matter of the *mati work*, or sexual relations between women, and she found out that it is not considered as an identity, but as a *practice*, a verb instead of a noun (Wekker, 2006, p.13). This means that having a certain kind of sexual relations or behaviours does not put you in a gendered box.

Some feminists have evidenced the connection between gender and heterosexuality, or how the construction of a radical different sexuality for women and men, as opposite and complementary is mutually dependent on the heterosexual norm (Caplan, 1989 and Vanwesenbeeck, 2009).

### 3.5 HETEROSEXUALITY AND HETERONORMATIVITY

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“Heterosexuality is a key-site for the intersection between gender and sexuality” (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009, p. 123).

Contrary to what many people would think today, “heterosexuality” is a very recent concept: its public debut was in 1880 in Germany in a work defending homosexuality. In a few decades a consensus developed among medical men that heterosexual referred to normal “other sex” eros: “The doctors proclaimed a new heterosexual separatism – an erotic apartheid that forcefully segregated the sex normals from the sex perverts” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 15). This enforced the suppression of all other forms of possible sexualities since they would threaten the dominant ideology’s view of sex as “innate” and “natural” (Caplan, 1989, p. 2). “Heterosexuality” is considered the only normal sexual orientation, following the same logic that any person should fit into a male or female category, which will determine a certain number of all-male or all-female norms (Warner, 1991).

Some feminist thinkers, such as Adrienne Rich (1980) went even further in defining heterosexuality, not only as a certain sexual identity, but as well as a “political institution, in that it serves to enforce gender hierarchy with prescribed rules of femininity and masculinity” (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005, p. 118-119). It is through heterosexuality that male domination and female subordination are institutionalized and sexualized (Jackson, 1984, p.77).

In the nineties the concept of “heteronormativity” also emerged, which means that many (stereotyped) beliefs are reinforced by social institutions and social policies. In particular the division of society into the opposite and complementary categories of

male and female, each of them with a “natural” role; for example the law that marriage can happen only between people of different “sexes”, or that the man is the chief of the household (in Italy until 1975, see Cutrufelli, 2001). In the words of Anne Fausto-Sterling: “We have become a society of ‘normalization’ where the normal takes precedence over the natural” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 8).

Another important aspect of heterosexuality, where (implicit) norms are created and normalized is concerning the heterosexual intercourse. (Hetero) sexual interaction has been found to be “one of the most powerful domains in which men and women feel pressure to enact gender roles” (Sanchez and co., 2005, p. 1456). Heterosexuality may be particularly inviting of gendered behaviour in the first place, and thus be co-constitutive to gender in an important way: conditions are still such that women lose out more in sexuality than men do when they conform to gender norms (Sanchez and co., 2005). This can be seen clearly in the next paragraph where I will explain how heterosexuality works in our current sexual model and sexual behaviour. In addition to this, it is important to remember that gendered sexuality is indeed a situated process, more likely to be “done” in certain contexts and situations. Gender conformity in sexual behaviours is more likely to be enacted in situations “where, among others, gender is relatively salient, or in situations that are public, unfamiliar or confusing, or when less individuated information about subjects is available, such as flirting situations, first dates, and new sexual relations among newcomers in the sexual arena” (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009, p. 123).

### 3.5 THE “BIOLOGICAL” MODEL OF SEXUALITY

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“One and one equals another one. Pleasure in the female is not a requirement. Pair-bonding is stronger in geese. We’re not talking about love, we’re talking about biology. That’s how we all got her, daughter”.

Margaret Atwood from “The female body” (1983)

Heterosexuality is also connected to a certain model of sexuality, which is basically a “biological” one, where sex is seen as mostly a reproductive function. Its roots are in the evolutionary theory, for which coitus is a biological imperative, a “natural” act that must be pleasurable, since if reproduction didn’t happen the species would extinguish (Jackson, 1984). This biological claim of course presumes that sex can actually be “normal” and “instinctual” only in heterosexuals (Katz, 2007). This particular definition has influenced language as well as a certain sexual behaviour, in fact “the very term ‘sexual intercourse’, which could in theory mean any form of sexual interaction, is in practice synonymous with coitus in everyday speech as well as in the scientific literature” (Jackson, 1984, p. 45). Also, all sexual behaviours which do not correspond to coitus (such as manual or oral stimulations, kisses or hugging) are defined as “foreplay”, meaning that they should ideally happen to prepare the partners to the sexual act: erection for the male, and if we are lucky, lubrication for the female (Fabris and Davis, 1978). It is only in exceptional cases that foreplay can be practiced without being followed by “the act”, in particular cases due to the place or the time, otherwise they do not have a value in themselves.

We might argue that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a change has happened with the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and the legalization and democratization of contraception, more or less available to the whole population, as well as the emergence of women’s rights and the success of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of romantic love, as a component of all relationships. So nowadays sex and sexuality are mostly seen as separate from reproduction, but the idea remains that sex equals “coitus”. Margaret Jackson sees it as a failure by many feminists as well as most sexologists, to question the “male definitions of 'sex', based on the coital imperative and the primacy of the penis” (Jackson, 1984, p. 46).

This vision of the “real” sexual act only in the coitus limits the expression of sexuality only to “genital exchanges”, or its genital dimension. This contributes to what Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis (1978) defined as “sexual misery”, or a degradation of the whole range of possibilities of free and satisfactory sexuality due to taboos, interdictions and rules. The rest of the body, which is potentially full of erogenous zones (Fabris and Davis, 1978) is de-sexualized or excluded from a social recognition in sexuality. This vision split the body, divided in sexual and non sexual parts, and builds a hierarchy between sexual organs, applying gender characteristics: the penis and the semen are active, while the vagina and the uterus are passive. This logic brought even the research of Masters and Johnson, in 1966, to affirm that the penis is “the primary organ for sexual pleasure for *both* sexes” (Caplan, 1989, p. 73). In this genital sexuality the penis is the most important organ, and the “sexual dysfunctions” are based on this model of sexuality: a woman can be considered anorgasmic if she doesn’t reach an orgasm through coitus (even though she does in

other ways), and a man impotent if he is not capable of having or maintaining an erection (Masters and Johnson, 1966). Following the same logic orgasm is considered the most important source of pleasure, but a gender distinction is applied: while the male orgasm is thought of as necessary (for reproduction) and visible (through ejaculation)<sup>15</sup>, the female one is unnecessary and invisible, so can be forgotten. This is called by Margaret Jackson (1984) "the eroticization of women's oppression in heterosexuality".

The clitoris, of course, did not fit in this model, being independent from penis, coitus and reproduction, *and* bringing women to orgasm by themselves. In the words of Anne Koedt: "The recognition of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution" (Koedt, 1970), which is why it was defined by psychoanalysis as a children game, that had to be abandoned when women entered an (hetero) sexual relation. In the next paragraph I will describe the deconstruction of this myth through the reflections of an Italian philosopher: Carla Lonzi.

### **3.6 IN BETWEEN THE CLITORAL WOMAN AND THE VAGINAL ONE**

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Carla Lonzi<sup>16</sup> and a part of the feminist movement of the seventies was claiming the clitoris as the real and *only* sexual organ of women. This has to be intended as a philosophical as well as a political, anti-patriarchal statement, due to its negation operated through centuries. Carla Lonzi's essay *La donna clitoridea e la donna*

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<sup>15</sup> Of course this is a myth, since it has been demonstrated that men can ejaculate without orgasm, in fact "ejaculation and orgasm are separate events that usually occur closely together" (Heidelbaugh and co., 2007, p. 270).

<sup>16</sup> For more details about her life and theories see Boccia (1990), or Merico (2007).

*vaginale*, published the first time in 1973, did not become famous at that time, and still is not known at an international level, but is one of the most original theory of the Italian feminism.

Carla Lonzi (1977) marks a clear distinction between the vagina and the clitoris: the first is the place of reproduction (fitting the “biological model” of sexuality), while the second one is the place of pleasure, which makes it the real sexual organ for women. The misrecognition of this clear difference was operated by patriarchy, which created the myth of the vaginal pleasure. Then a second distinction is operated between the vaginal woman, who reaches the orgasm through heterosexual intercourse with penetration, and the clitoral one, who manages her pleasure with the stimulation of the clitoris. This is mainly a metaphor, a political assertion of the right of women of having an autonomous sexuality, opposed to the strong and oppressive social influences which can inhibit women in knowing their bodies and preventing them from expressing their orgasmic potential. In fact the “*donna clitoridea*” develops her sexuality through a process of self-exploration, which in general starts from infancy, and the danger of this independence from the male organs is that she understands the distinction between pleasure and reproduction. This is not profitable in a patriarchal system where the man and the State appropriate of the children born (Lonzi, 1977). Freud and his followers in psychoanalysis have fastened to define the clitoral woman as immature, since she is not accepting her role in a heterosexual relationship, where her pleasure should shift to the vagina, fitting the norms of heterosexuality. The oppression in the sexual intercourse lays in the symbolic clitoridectomy operated on women and the super power given to the penis. The

complementarity which is wished in a heterosexual couple always lies in the binary active-passive, penetrating-penetrated, dominant-dominated, in this sense the penis is seen as the vehicle of pleasure for both partners, as we have already seen. Freud argued that the vaginal pleasure is the only mature one, since it symbolize the acceptance of the woman of a more passive and receptive role, the one she is destined in a heterosexual couple (Lonzi, 1977). According to Freud it is a psychosexual development, but Lonzi replies that it is a “psychosocial adaptation” (Lonzi, 1977, p.127). More precisely, the woman is convinced that she needs a partner in order to enjoy sex, to the extent that sex becomes synonymous of vaginal penetration. This loss of independence will then subordinate her in all the other parts of her life. Therefore as a part of women emancipation Lonzi declares that there has to be the re-appropriation of their entire bodies, their capacity of orgasm and the autonomy of all this. I believe that her theory has not to be taken in a literal sense but better as a provocation, like the two lips of Luce Irigaray (1977); both were radical answers aiming to shock the (mis)believes of their times. In Carla Lonzi’s thought there is no intent of building a new hierarchy between women, with the clitoral on top and the vaginal down, due to their collaboration with the patriarchal/heteronormative regime. And as well there is no intent of promoting masturbation against a heterosexual relationship. In Carla Lonzi’s words women should not accept “heterosexuality at any prize, but heterosexuality if it has no prize” (Lonzi, 1977, p.118, my translation), which means that heterosexuality should be made a possibility, not compulsory, and that in a heterosexual couple there should be no rules neither roles. In order to have a true love relationship both partners have to be subjects. The complementarity has to be found outside the genitals (Lonzi, 1977).

This brings me to seek for a wider definition of sexuality, able to take the body as a whole, in the poetic words of Hélène Cixous, she argues that there should be no dictatorship of one part of the body.

“I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female; because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives, and wanting it alive” (Cixous, 1976, p. 891).

I agree with her in arguing that there is no need of forgetting all the others body parts, which might be enjoyed by any individual depending on his/her tastes, the moment, or the partner. Thanks to the *Hite Report* (1976) we have now a panorama of the many different ways in which women have experienced pleasure *and* orgasm, choosing different parts of their body and different techniques of stimulating themselves. And for sure many more are possible. There is no correct way of masturbating, or experiencing a sexual act, no feminist way of having an orgasm, no obligation of having an orgasm. The quest of a satisfactory sexuality should be:

“To overcome the ignorance of oneself or the religious or psychoanalytical blame, appropriate of the zones and ways of our multi-lateral pleasure, to value auto-eroticism as love and knowledge about one self, to think and look for an orgasm as a pleasurable possibility to live, not like a new must<sup>17</sup>” (Longobardo, 1998, p. 93, my translation).

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<sup>17</sup> “Uscire dall’ignoranza di sé o dalla colpevolizzazione religiosa o psicanalitica, riappropriarsi dei luoghi e delle modalità del proprio piacere multiforme, valorizzare l’autoerotismo come amore e conoscenza di sé, pensare e ricercare l’orgasmo come una possibilità piacevole da vivere, non un nuovo obbligo: sono aspetti fondamentali della ricerca delle donne, della propria sessualità”.

These are all fundamental steps in order to built new satisfactory multiple sexualities.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

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### 4.1 MY EYES, MY BODY, MY RESEARCH

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According to Donna Haraway (1991) it is impossible to see anything (the world, a research) from nowhere. The notion of complete objectivity is non-sense, since all “eyes” of the world see in different ways, depending on their own point of view, or the place from which they see and the body they live in. It is only by positioning oneself that we are able to claim anything, to study anything: “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway, 1991, p. 190). In my research I will apply the concept of “feminist objectivity” or embodied objectivity, which is situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991, p. 188). My eyes, or my critical gaze will be strictly connected to my life experiences and my embodied self.

I believe that it is impossible to negate that my own personal narrative did shape and frame my research. Drawing upon Mari Luz Esteban and her idea of “anthropology of the body” (Esteban, 2004) I make of this point, once considered a weakness, my strength. Making explicit the connections between the personal experience and the academic life is not something negative, instead it should be praised and considered valuable. In fact it is strictly by starting from my own body and my own experience that I wish to give credit to my research. This means as well using the technique of auto-observation, or starting from one self in order to understand the experiences of the others, especially when you passed through similar situations (Esteban, 2004). For this reason I will first position myself in order to elucidate the motivations that brought me to this research and the influence this had on the whole

process of the investigation. In this way I wish to acknowledge both the situation in which the knowledge was produced and a few personal experiences that brought me to this research.

The intersectionality of my (perceived) gender, sex, sexuality, class, ethnicity and the places where I lived have affected my way of life as well as my academic career. I was born and educated in Bologna, Italy in a middle-class family with catholic values, then I studied one year in France (Lyon, at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques), one year in Holland (Utrecht, in the Gender Studies department) and one year in Spain (Granada, at the Instituto de Estudios de la Mujer). I was confronted with many different social settings, each of them with a slightly diverse idea of "woman", sometimes allowing me more privileges (compared to my place of origins), sometimes exposing me to more discriminations. As well I could experiment four university systems and benefit from theories coming from different contexts, being written in different languages; at first this confused me, due to the enormity of material available, but, of course, it enriched me and provided me of a multidisciplinary and multilingual toolbox that I can use now in my thesis. Feminism(s), from both its activist and academic side has greatly influenced my whole life. I own to feminism my awakening upon many sides of this society that still have to be changed, but as well many sides of myself which were formed before I could be taking part in it. Little by little realizing the genealogy of social constructions, I could empower myself to modify them, at least in my personal life. I started recognizing and affirming my rights and my needs in the university, the workplace, the relationships with family, friends...and last of all, lovers. Even after many (well, let's say 3 or 4) years of personal intellectual

growth and awakening, I still had never thought of how patriarchal society was as well influencing my sexual life and even my concept of “sex”. Some recent sexual experiences, the discussions with (feminists and non-yet-feminists) friends, and the reading of the most recent research about the sexual behaviours of Italian people, made me realize the importance of this fact, not only in my personal life. I started to register a certain frequency of what at first I thought being only “my problem”. For example shyness in telling a sexual partner what I liked, or even shyness in admitting to myself my sexual needs and desires. Finally, I was able to contextualize my personal experience into the frame of a more general situation, common to many women like me. Then, thanks to my formation in gender studies that taught me how the personal is still political, I could analyze this phenomenon from a feminist perspective. So, I can conclude that surely in my case “the possibility of understanding the darkest parts of my own sexual, corporal, emotional and intellectual experience was implicit in the decision of the objectives of my research”<sup>18</sup> (Esteban, 2004, p. 45, my translation).

#### **4.2 BETWEEN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DILEMMA**

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The choice of the method is essential in the development of the research and it does influence its results. For this reason it has to be carefully planned and valued, especially depending on the specific subject of research, the tools and time available. Many feminist researchers have for a long time refused the quantitative method, accusing it of having its roots in the phallogocentric system, which ignore the presence of

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<sup>18</sup>“Poder entender las zonas más oscuras de mi propia experiencia sexual, corporal, emocional e intelectual ha sido algo implícito en la consecución de los fines de la investigación”.

women and their specificity (Pedrero in Blázquez Graf and co., 2010). This is certainly true but, on the other hand, from quantitative research might emerge some key questions, in particular regarding the “prevalence” of a problem in a particular group of people, in this case women (Westmarland, 2001). As for women’s experiences, a quantitative study might enable to name some specific women’s situation where a discrimination is taking place, and set their extension in the population. This could emerge from a critical look on the data furnished even if the quantitative research was not conducted with a specific gender perspective. This is my case, in fact I started wondering about women’s specific problems in orgasm after having read the mostly quantitative research *La sessualità degli italiani* (Barbagli and co., 2010). In this case the purpose of the study was only collecting and describing the sexual behaviours of the Italian population, without any specific interest in analyzing this state of things in regards to sex/gender and the patriarchal structure of sexuality. But from the numbers I was able to extrapolate the frequency of situations such as lack of orgasm and faking orgasms, which is still clearly a massive phenomenon regarding women, and even young women. So it is thanks to a quantitative study that I felt the need to investigating from a qualitative point of view the reasons for this number. Therefore the contribution of the quantitative research in giving statistics and data can be useful in recognizing the importance of these phenomenon, alarming feminist students by suggesting that something patriarchal is still in the air. However I see the use of a more qualitative instrument as fundamental in order to fully understand the experiences of the women involved, transforming the numbers in bodies and stories, in particular for approaching themes so intimate and embodied such as sexual relations orgasm and

pleasure. So I decided that the right method for my study was the semi-structured in depth interviews.

### **4.3 PRELIMINARY WORK TO THE INTERVIEWS**

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I chose to reduce my research to the target of young women between 23 and 29 years of age, born and grown up in Bologna, Italy, having had (hetero) sexual experiences. Since I did plan this research starting from my personal experience, the choice of the target reflects as well the wish of exploring myself through the stories of others. I am myself grown up in Bologna, and this aspect could guarantee me the possibility of moving comfortably inside the city and getting to interview a consistent number of women, thanks to my personal contacts. I do fit into the class of age I chose and I am a woman myself. I see these common aspects as privileges, that allowed me a special relationship with the interviewees, facilitating the dialogue and motivating both of us to trust each other and share experiences, emotions, memories. It is the desire to establish a sort of “empathy” between myself and the interviewees that brought me to this choice (Cipolla, 1996).

In order to find women with the appropriate requisites, I activated my personal contacts. First I sent an email to all my connections in Bologna with a short description of my research and the type of persons I was looking for. The only characteristics which I listed were the age, the place of birth/growth and the willingness of approaching the subject of sexuality, (hetero)sexual relations and female sexual pleasure; this last part forcibly excluded very close-minded people from contacting me.

In the email I gave my full availability for realizing an introductory meeting through Skype in order to explain how the interview would have taken place, its duration and the general themes of my interest. Due to my permanence in Granada, Spain, at the time I was not able to meet in person the candidates before the interview but the conversation through Skype worked successfully. In general the first contact with women interested was established through a common friend, then a series of email followed and in few cases the Skype conversation. I strongly reassured the persons of the anonymity of the interview and the sole aim of my thesis for it. Also it was made clear that they would be able to talk about everything they thought relevant, adding to the themes I would propose, and that they would not be forced to answer all the questions, if they did not want to. Finally I encouraged the interviewees to suggest a place where they would feel comfortable and free to talk, if they had one.

Finding these persons was not easy due to the fact that talking about sexuality is something still taboo, especially for women, in the Italian society. Some of the interviewees confessed to me that, before contacting me, they were in doubt whether they would have had to deal with a real researcher or a pervert. The fact of having a mutual friend luckily reassured them.

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#### **4.4 INTERVIEW FORMAT**

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The interview format was “semi-structured”, which means that I had prepared a script with a series of themes and questions which I wanted to be touched upon, but there was no pre-determined order (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993 in Valles, 2002). In this way the interview was formed through a mixture of open

discussion about the main themes and the adding of questions at some strategic points by the interviewer (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993 in Valles, 2002), which made it different from a normal conversation.

The script reflected the objectives of the research. The specific themes I planned to discuss in the interviews are:

1. General thoughts about sexuality, sex, their importance in your life and their relationship with your body
2. The sources of information about sexuality
3. The process of self discovery/masturbation
4. The sexual relation with a partner and the sexual communication through the years
5. Orgasm and lack of orgasm in a (hetero) sexual relation
6. Faking an orgasm

During the interviews I generally did touch upon all the themes, even though I did not follow the chronological order of that list. Also I left the interviewees free to talk about what they felt important; thanks to this approach several themes emerged that I had not previously considered.

From Margery Franklin (1997) I took the “discourse model” of interview, where the interviewer is considered an active part in the interview: he/she is not a modest witness extrapolating the information from the interviewee, but has an active role, as much as the interviewee. In line with post-structuralist thought, no neutrality or objectivity is deemed possible (Franklin, 1997). In fact I assume I could have influenced the interviewee even though I did not mean to, for example with my sole presence or

with the use of a certain vocabulary. In this sense both the interviewer and the interviewee are recognized as conversational partners (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). But not only the interviewer is partial and non neutral, the interviewee as well has the power of influencing the flow of the interview, proposing new insights and driving the conversation outside the pre established script. The interview can be seen as a cooperative experience in which both conversational partners work together toward the enriching of both of them (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). As a specificity of the feminist methodology (even though not only) I recall the importance of not creating a situation of dominant-dominated in the interview, which means that it was made clear from the beginning that the interview had to be an exchange and the interviewee was able to express her wishes and ideas she found the most relevant (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Even in this case the power relations forcibly exist, because it is the interviewer who starts the conversation, setting a focus of interest in the whole range of possible conversations, however, through the “discourse model”, they are smoothed down as much as possible.

A “conversational mode” was established between the interviewer and the interviewee, which means that the language used was the one of a normal day-to-day conversation (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973 in Valles 2002). This was particularly relevant in the case of such a delicate theme as sexuality being considered, because many times the interviewees did not know any “formal terms” for talking about sexual practices or sexual body parts. From the beginning I clarified that even though my study was academic their language did not have to be so, and they could use all the words they felt right to express themselves. This enabled the interviewees not to be

embarrassed when having to use terms that are generally considered vulgar. In order to gain the confidence of the interviewee and establish an open atmosphere, I talked about my personal experiences when relevant and appropriate (Franklin, 1997), answering to some interviewee questions and turning the interview more into a mutual exchange. This aspect was strongly facilitated by the fact of having similar characteristics as the interviews (such as sex, age, provenience) and having confronted similar situations.

Following the model by Wengraf (2001) I did not underestimate the importance of the social setting, which is to say the time and place where the interview takes place, since it can actively influence the course of the interview and the tone of the conversation. In this sense I strongly advised the interviewees to choose the place where they would feel the more comfortable and I gave my complete availability for moving anywhere in the city in any time they would be free. Finally I met four girls at their home, two in a park and two in a bar. In case of bad weather and no availability of places I had asked to the Centro di Documentazione delle Donne of Bologna the permission of using one room in their building. They accepted and gave me the keys in order to be able to access even during closure time. Finally I did not need to use their space, because the interviewees successfully proposed available places.

Before doing the actual interviews I conducted a few pilot interviews with friends in order to test the efficiency of the approach.

This is the way in which I decided to structure the search for qualitative data, which took into consideration some feminist innovations. All interviews were conducted by me, and were done with only one person at the time. They lasted

between one hour and two hours and a half, depending on the availability of the interviewees. In the moment of the interview a very small introduction was done about the objectives of my thesis. Like in Kinsey's interviews I tried to break the taboo by treating all subjects as "normal" and creating a "permissive" atmosphere, in order to avoid putting any shame or discomfort when talking about any subject (Operto, 2011). All the interviews were audio taped and then transcribed by the author. All names and the personal data were changed in order to protect the privacy of the persons. The recordings were erased at the end of the research for the same reason.

#### **4.5 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

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Then came the fundamental part of the analysis of the interviews and their interpretation. Following the objectives of my research I developed two different strategies. In the first part of my study I decided to do an analysis of the content in order to accomplish with my first objective: examine the sources of information about sexuality that women talked about in the interviews and the type of knowledge they produce. So I proceeded with a descriptive analysis of what women have said without including any extract of the interviews, since I find this information fundamental in order to develop later my arguments, but not strictly connected to the main research question. In the second part, in line with my second objective, I have opted for an analysis of the discourses of young women in respect to reaching an orgasm during a (hetero) sexual relation, unfolding those social discourses that still influence and limit their agency.

The first step of the analysis of the interviews was its division into themes following the method of the “template analysis”, especially advised for qualitative research (King, 2004). When approaching the interviewees I had already a set of themes, defined “a priori” in line with the research questions, as we have seen in the section “Interview format”<sup>19</sup>, so I used it to formulate my initial template (King, 2004). While reading and coding each transcript they were progressively modified to include those themes that the women spontaneously proposed as essential to them (King, 2004). A hierarchical organization of codes was applied so as to divide codes into “higher-order codes” and “lower-order codes”.

“Hierarchical coding allows the researcher to analyze texts at varying levels of specificity. Broad higher-order codes can give a good overview of the general direction of the interview, while detailed lower-order codes allow for very fine distinctions to be made, both within and between cases” (King, 2004, p. 258).

This was quite a hard process, since the majority of themes are intertwined, for example “orgasm” would be coded both in “masturbation”, “sexual relation”, “faking” etc., so this involved a progressive redefinition of the template. The final template resulted in coding the accounts of women into four broad themes, which are the discourses that I aim to analyze. These are: the acquisition of sexual knowledge, the taboo of women masturbation, the myth of the vaginal orgasm and the sexual needs of men.

The second step was the interpretations of the data, according to the fact that “rather than simply reflecting and validating whatever women tell us about their

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<sup>19</sup> See paragraph 4.4 “Interview format”.

experience, many of us [feminists] use our analyses specifically in order to challenge and criticize the way in which women's experience is constructed under (hetero) patriarchy" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997, cited in Speer, 2005, p. 24). So, analyzing the discourses of women in respect to orgasm in a (hetero) sexual relation means using their recounting of experiences for unfolding the social discourses that create and limit their agency in the Italian and western society in this historical moment (Gavey, 1989). My wish is to "understand how at a specific moment several coexisting and potentially contradictory discourses concerning sexuality make available different positions and different powers for men and women" (Hollway, 1984, p. 261).

In order to do so, I'll define three very important concepts: "discourse", "experience" and "agency", which will be fundamental in exploring the embodied and subjective perceptions of the women interviewed.

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#### **4.5.1 Discourse and Gendered discourse**

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"Discourse" has a wide variety of meanings: the first big difference is between discourse as language, and discourse as language *and* practice. This innovation was brought by Michel Foucault (1984), who saw the discourse as "a system of representation" (Hall, 1997, p. 74) or, in simple terms, as "*ways of seeing the world*" (Sunderland, 2004, p. 8). For Michel Foucault (1984) "discourses are inherently ideological 'flows of information' which construct the world through language and texts, and 'subject position' individuals" (Sunderland, 2004, p. 8). So discourses constitute the subjects, as well as the objects, since "physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse"

(Hall, 1997, p. 73). And, in addition to this, the individual become the subject, in a precise environment, sex/gender system or system of discourses, which are partly responsible for shaping their personality, tastes and “agency” (de Lauretis, 1987). Discourses pre-exist individual persons, who didn’t have the chance to forge them, but when speaking and acting people constantly re-produce or challenge discourses. As well, discourses are “powerful in the sense of enabling as well as hindering” (Mills, 1997, cited in Sunderland, 2004), as I’ll explain in the section of “agency”.

Discourses are not “themselves visible”, but they can be found recognizable in many ways of manifestations, such as in talks, written texts, images, etc. (Sunderland, 2004). So when analysing the interviews I use the words of the interviewees only in terms of manifestation of discourses, as a simple way to “trace” the social discourses (Sunderland, 2004).

Due to my specific approach and aim I wish to remind how discourses are gendered (Sunderland, 2004). So, also, ‘subject positioning’ is gendered, especially in my research this is always kept in mind, since “sexuality” is a widely gendered ground of discourses. In fact, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis “the construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 9), or, in a Foucauldian sense, of discourses and the way the single person embodies them (with some degree of negotiation). Gender is still a very important category of study for feminists, which cannot be abandoned for the moment, in fact this permits to focus our research on the “constitutive element of social relationships based on *perceived* differences between the sexes” (Scott, 1986, p. 1067) and their consequent relationships of power. It is very important to note how

gendered discourses can provide very different positions and possibilities for men and women (Hollway, 1984).

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#### 4.5.2 The meaning of experience

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“Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (Scott, 1991, p. 792), this is the way in which it has to be analyzed. In this matter I found very inspiring the article *The Evidence of Experience* that Joan Scott wrote in 1991. It is contextualized in the feminist theory debate about “experience”, a powerful and empowering concept for many feminists, still nowadays. In particular it is fundamental when analyzing interviews. One of the problems of this term, as Joan Scott explains, is the tendency of using experience as an evidence to naturalize, or reify, discursively-produced identities, meaning that there is a tendency to “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference” (Scott, 1991, p. 777). A clear example could be the Italian research of 2010, where is reported that 60% of Italian women still simulate an orgasm, so it is assumed that it is the feminine nature to simulate orgasm (Barbagli and co., 2010). A good analysis should go toward the study of the processes of subject creation and the context where the phenomenon is produced, not just the experience itself. In the case of my example should be not only the report of how these women experience their present situation of faking an orgasm, but to trace how they content themselves and prefer the faking upon the real orgasm. The experience should be accompanied by a deep analysis of the discourses available in society taking into account the whole sex-gender system (from school, to media, family values, political

discourse about women..). In other words experience is not the source of explanation but, instead, what is still needed to be explained, what should be studied in depth: experience cannot be taken as “self-evident” but has to be contextualized, especially in the broader web of discourses available in society.

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### 4.5.3 Agency

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This concept is fundamental in order to analyze the experiences of women and the power they have in making their choices, since “subjects are constituted discursively (...) agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them” (Scott, 1991, p. 793). In fact agency is not an “inherent attribute of individuals” (Scott, 1991, p. 793) rather it depends on the context and how subjects are constituted as different. For example the existence of a “biological” discourse which privilege women who experience orgasm through coitus, provides them with a rewarded position of passivity, instead of promoting their active research of pleasure. This discourse fits into a more general dominant western model of femininity and masculinity as complementary and opposite, those who submit to it are generally awarded male gratification. So the discourse of femininity as passive limits their agency to the nearly impossibility of participating in the reaching of their orgasm, or even the legitimization of the clitoral orgasm. But this co-exist with the new permissive discourse for whose sex is natural for everybody, and we should be free to express it (Hollway, 1984). In this sense the current discourses, typically pose a limit between those who are excluded and those who are included (Foucault, 1982). Since “vaginal women” are the ones included in the discourse, but only a minority of women can reach an orgasm by vaginal penetration only (Kinsey, 1953, Masters and Johnson, 1966, Hite, 1973, Fabris

and Davis, 1978) it is not surprising to see that a high rate of faking orgasms is still registered in Italy nowadays.

As we have seen the confusion is created by the existence of a multiplicity of discourses at the same time, which makes more complicated the aim of reaching a coherent explanation. It is important to engage into “the complex and contradictory nature of discourses around contemporary active female sexuality, for example that it is both experienced as pleasurable and liberating, and yet reproduces an image that appears objectifying” (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010, p. 3). So we will see how it is impossible to decide for a division of women between oppressed and liberated, passive or active, object or subject. The Foucauldian concept of “technologies of the self” allows an explanation of how people are not entirely submitted to the discourses present in society (as well due to their variety), but are rather negotiating between them; the *marge de manoeuvre* lays in some adaptations that can be made when transporting the discourse into the actual body of a person. In fact the “ ‘technologies of the self’ permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality”(Foucault, 1988, p. 18). So every contemporary Italian woman find already in this world some precise ideals of femininity and sexuality, her agency has to be found in the degree of possibility in the negotiation of those. In fact reproducing models that are readable by the discourse can afford “pleasure” (Foucault, 1988), for example the fact of reassuring their partner with a fake orgasm can become more attractive than “orgasm” itself.

So “agency” is a very complicated term, which needs to be carefully filtered through the experiences of the women interviewed and the discourses available in society that emerge from it.

## **5. DISCOURSES AND EXPERIENCES OF THE YOUNG WOMEN INTERVIEWED**

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In this part I will analyze the interviews I have carried out with eight young women. I have divided this section into three parts: in the first one I give a comprehensive account of the profiles of the women interviewed, in the second one I make a content analysis of the sources of information on sexuality that women talked about, and in the third one I define the most interesting social discourses that influence the choices of young women in reaching (or not) an orgasm during a (hetero) sexual encounter. Of course some discourses are more widespread than others. Excerpts from the interviews demonstrate the themes I choose for the analysis. So even though the material that emerged from the interviews is much more vast and rich, I focused here only on those parts which have to do with the research question.

### **5.1 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON THE WOMEN INTERVIEWED**

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The profiles of the women interviewed are:

- All born, grown up and currently living in Bologna, two have lived one year away from Bologna.
- All are doing or have done University studies: Architecture, Communication, Medicine, Anthropology, Physics, Veterinary, Economy, Fine arts.
- Age: three of 23 years old, three of 24, one of 26, one of 27.
- Economic status: all between working class and middle class.

- Economic situation: five totally maintained by their parents, two working, one periodically working.
- Religion: all of them define themselves as non-religious, but the majority have received a catholic education.

The names of the women were changed in order to guarantee their anonymity, which all of them wanted to maintain.

Bologna is situated in the centre-north of Italy and it has a population of around 371 thousand people, according to the last Census of 2001<sup>20</sup>. It is a university city, the oldest one in Europe, in the year 2008-2009 there were 84.318 students enrolled in the University<sup>21</sup>.

## **5.2 WHERE SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM: SCHOOL, FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

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One of the most important teachings of second wave feminism is that knowledge is a fundamental factor in empowering women: in the specific case of sexuality for example, it is knowledge about one's own physiology, sexual functioning, sexual zones and how to achieve pleasure and orgasm in a sexual relation that empowers. This animated the Boston Women's Health Collective to realize an important guide written by women, for women and about women, called "Our Bodies,

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/piancont/Menu/mencensi.htm>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/piancont/dati\\_statistici/Indici/Istruzione/index.htm](http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/piancont/dati_statistici/Indici/Istruzione/index.htm)

ourselves”<sup>22</sup>, or Shere Hite to collect women’s experiences in the *Hite Report* (1976). This was also the principle of the consciousness-raising group in Italy (Lonzi, 1977): appropriate knowledge of their own bodies despite the prejudices about women’s nature which still proliferate in our society. Knowledge of women’s orgasm produces empowerment and promotes conscious choices about one’s own life. For example, the discovery of the clitoris as the real site of all women’s orgasms opened the possibility of the emancipation of women’s sexual lives, legitimizing clitoral stimulation in a normal (hetero) sexual relation. But is this information accessible to young women? How do women construct their (first) notions of sexuality? What sexual knowledge is accessible to them?

The three first sources of information, especially when young people do not have experiences of their own yet, are school, parents and peers. Nearly all the young women interviewed did not receive any sexual education either from school or from parents. A specificity of Italy is that up to now there hasn’t been any official legislation making sexual education a mandatory subject (Parker, Wellings and Lazarus, 2009), so it largely depends on the school’s policy or the willingness of individual professors, whether the students receive some form of sexual education or not.

Carmen, Linda, Anna and Vittoria don’t remember any sexual notion coming from school, while Celeste recalls that at elementary school the teachers showed a documentary where it was explained how babies were born, creating in her mind a

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<sup>22</sup> It is based on women’s experiences, and its aim is to re gain control of our bodies against the intervention of (male-dominated) medicine or science, whose phallogocentric gaze damages women instead of helping them.

rudimentary notion of the sexual difference between men and women. Franca, Giovanna and Miriam had one class in secondary school in Biology, mostly about anatomy and, for some, on contraceptives. So school seems to be dismissed as a place where only very basic and superficial information is given, the few notions received are not seen as something useful to intimacy or first sexual experiences. Sexuality as a pleasurable event is totally absent from the school programs. Giovanna is the only one who was given a course on AIDS when she was 18, which she recalls as having been very useful.

Italian research from 2010 shows that from the seventies there has been a slow but relevant opening of the possibilities of dialogue between parents and sons/daughters, which was nearly impossible before (Caltabianco, 2010). Nevertheless it has not yet become a normal habit in many families, and in the cases of the young women interviewed it is rather the exception. For Linda and Miriam it has always been a total taboo in the family. Celeste, Franca and Vittoria received some kind of “in-extreme” explanations when they had their first boyfriends, but they involved more gendered notions such as “do not concede yourself too quickly!” (Franca’s mother) than practical information. For Vittoria there was more of a fight, because her mother didn’t want her to sleep at her boyfriend’s place, since she thought it was “too early”. Giovanna is the only one who, together with the warnings, received a kind of “sexual education” about the beauty of sexuality and the need for contraception. So for those who did receive some information, it was most likely the mothers who gave it, and they seem to have played an important role in slowing the daughters down, containing their first sexual impulses and reminding them that they should look for special people.

No reference was made to virginity as a value, but they were still transmitted the idea that their “first time” had to be something to be careful about, and that it should not be given away easily. The fathers seem to have been nearly completely absent from the sexual sphere of their daughters. The only exception seems to be Celeste, whose father gave her a box of condoms when she had her first boyfriend. So parents are not a safe source of information either, women are more likely to receive fears and interdictions, than advice and support.

As demonstrated by the Italian research of 2010, same age or older friends are still the first source of information about sexuality (Caltabianco, 2010). In addition in my interviews the intervention of peers was the most frequent answer, but the information received was most likely full of prejudices, interdictions and a negative vision of sexuality, for women. For example Vittoria and Franca recalls friends having told them about some classmates “they masturbate, disgusting! So you start thinking that you’re disgusting yourself” (Franca). Friends are generally not in possession of any further practical knowledge, but they “favour the definition of the gender identities and orientate towards the behaviours that are considered the most socially appropriate<sup>23</sup>” (Caltabianco, 2010, p. 41, my translation). Peers were the most influential in transmitting categories of *normal* and *abnormal*, such as sexual practices to do or not to do: “anal sex is for whores” (Franca), “if a man masturbates it is normal, if a woman does so she is a nymphomaniac” (Linda).

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<sup>23</sup> “Favoriscono anche la definizione delle identità di genere e orientano verso i comportamenti ritenuti socialmente appropriate dal gruppo di pari”.

So at the ages of first becoming conscious of the sexual dimension of life, there are very few occasions for exchanging fears and doubts; what happens is rather the building up of rules and taboos of sexuality and sexual relations. The formation of a set of “sexual norms” happens based purely on “popular beliefs” (Nicolson and Burr, 2003, p. 1741): the lack of formal education in schools and the unspeakability of the subject in families, deprives young people of competent sources of practical information, combined with the talking that happens between friends, which mainly consists of the prejudices, taboos and many false beliefs that still proliferate in our culture, for example, in a clearly anti-female masturbation sense.

As Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis wrote in 1978 “in our culture the discovery of sexuality on the part of young people happens in conditions of absolute isolation and loneliness in respect to adults”<sup>24</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 57, my translation), in fact, even nowadays, there are essentially no reliable persons that can be consulted and who may furnish valuable information about what to expect from sexuality, what sexuality is, how a sexual encounter works. This, of course, creates a whole atmosphere of fear and ignorance, which continues even later when girls and boys have experiences and problems they would like to share and confront, but cannot.

Vittoria explains that she learned most of the “technical stuff” by herself. For example, she read in a book about the difference between a clitoral and vaginal orgasm, even though she had never experienced it. Reading without any guide to

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<sup>24</sup> “Nella nostra cultura la scoperta della sessualità da parte del giovane avviene –rispetto agli adulti– nelle condizioni di assoluto isolamento e di solitudine”.

consult about the validity of what you are reading can make you fall for certain concepts that have long been the official medical belief, but that are now totally discredited. So no certain reliable sources of information are available for young people.

In conclusion we can see that the sources of information by women and for women such as the *Boston Women's Health Book Collective* (1971), the *Hite Report* (1976) or an Italian equivalent are not yet widespread throughout the young women interviewed. Basic notions of sexuality, such as the clitoris being the most important sexual organ for women (Kinsey, 1953, Masters and Johnson, 1966, Hite, 1973, Fabris and Davis, 1978) are still ignored. As we will see, this leaves space for myths, discredited more than thirty years ago, to retain credence in the minds of young women. We can therefore conclude that gender inequality mediates the transmission of knowledge and, as we will see later, its application (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005). In fact “[n]one of the sources from which young women learn about sex encourages or equips them to pursue sexual autonomy” (Holland and co., 1998, p. 80).

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### **5.3 THE TABOO OF WOMEN MASTURBATION DESPITE ITS POPULARITY**

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“It is something so primordial; I cannot believe people don’t masturbate.”

(Miriam)

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#### **5.3.1 When do women start to masturbate?**

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One of the most interesting things that emerged about masturbation in the young women of our study is its commencement in childhood. This is a phenomenon

already evidenced by other research, for example in various reported accounts in the *Hite Report* (1976), but is totally absent from the two Italian surveys considered, particularly, in the 2010 one it is said that women only learn to masturbate 6 or 7 years after men (Barbagli and co., 2010): this might be true for some kind of “conscious masturbation”, but it doesn’t exclude the possibility that some little girls learnt where their clitoris was before even knowing how to pronounce it, so before receiving any kind of negative social influence about it. Failure to recognize this might be due to Western resistance to considering children as sexual subjects, and the censure of children’s masturbation as reported by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1978).

Four of the eight women I interviewed clearly recalled a sort of masturbation or clitoral touching/rubbing when they were 5-8 years old, without even knowing what it was and what it meant in our society. Some ignored that it was something to be hidden and so would do it in the presence of other people, or even with other friends, as a pleasurable game with each other. Vittoria and Celeste recall having had best friends with whom they would mutually touch each other.

“Yes, you can say that I had a friend, a girl, with whom I would practice a sort of mutual masturbation. We were around 6 and we discovered it by accident, it was something we got used to, we incorporated it into our normal behaviour. When we were together, we would play and even touch each other. It was totally normal to us. Once my older sister saw us and told me with a serious voice ‘I know what you are doing’, which of course I understood only later” (Vittoria).

This absolute lack of sense of taboo, “innocently” exposed the little girls to being “discovered” and, in some cases, discouraged from doing so, interiorizing a sense of guilt about a simple act with one’s own body.

“When I was very little, 5 years old, I would masturbate like many other kids, one day my mother saw me and told me that if I continued I would not be able to piss anymore, or something bad would happen to me. As a kid I got very scared, and I associated it with something very bad, this brought me to live sexuality in a scared embarrassed way. I always continued to masturbate, but I had to do it hiding, and I interiorized a sense of guilt” (Miriam).

Paradoxically it is only later, as an adolescent that she discovered that the forbidden thing she did when she was a child was “masturbating”, so something that as an adult she would re-interpret as natural and positive. In one case, Anna, would masturbate by stroking her clitoris with a teddy bear when she was around 7-8 years old, but as she had already interiorized that it was something to be hidden, she doesn’t recall any traumatic experience but only that she suddenly stopped masturbating, she doesn’t know why, probably from puberty when the first boyfriends started. From adolescence to now she has never masturbated again, although sometimes she tries. She remains unable to masturbate herself, due to what she calls a “psychological block” (Anna); for example she cannot even insert a tampon because she contracts her muscles. So this demonstrates how the taboo is constructed from childhood through the building of the interdiction by those who “discover” the child, who starts receiving the negative influence of society who might interiorize a profound sense of guilt, and even stop masturbating for years.

The taboo will continue to be reinforced even during puberty-adolescence, reaching even those girls who escaped the first round of interdiction. In fact some girls (Franca, Giovanna, Linda) would start masturbating a bit later, around 12-15, always before having any contact with boys. Franca remembers she started simply touching herself around 12 but “at school I heard from friends that some other classmates would masturbate and everybody was like ‘bleah, disgusting’, so I started to think ‘am I disgusting?’ because I was touching myself as well... For boys it was different, everybody knew and found it normal” (Franca). So even for those who started later and didn’t experience a traumatic moment of “discovery”, the discourses of peers about the perversity of this practice were sufficient to make them feel inadequate. So they learned to deny their masturbation, transforming it into a lonely secret: “I knew boys did masturbate, but when someone would ask a girl, they would always deny it, so..mmm.. between 11 and 16 years old I would deny it as well!” (Vittoria). By contrast, from puberty there are generally no problems in considering that men masturbate, and as adolescents some women recalled having heard many times men talking about it without any shame.

“When I was in secondary school boys would often talk about masturbation, even in detail, so I would know the various “techniques” used by boys [she laughs].. but I never thought of sharing this aspect even with my most intimate friends, I always found it something very private, to keep for myself” (Celeste).

The trouble in talking about masturbation generally continues today, even though all the young women interviewed see masturbation as a positive thing nowadays, in the majority of cases it has been a process of acquisition, which for some is still in process.

There is a comparison to be made between this learned process of seeing masturbation as positive, and the actual positive thing experienced, without any learning, by those children who did practice it. For Franca it was the participation in a collective of women that really made her gain consciousness.

“It is there that I really started to talk about it, and accept it as something normal, natural. Hearing other women’s experiences was very helpful, it was something that finally convinced me. Since then I tried to talk about it also with other friends, but it is very hard” (Franca).

For Miriam it was only around the age of 17-18 that she understood it as normal, but “the fact of having had to hide it for such a long time brought me to deny my body for a long time, also I think that this atmosphere of hiding brought me to live my sexuality badly with other people as well” (Miriam).

So this declared positive vision clashes with the trouble in talking about it, even with their friends, for example Vittoria says: “even now there are some friends that I wouldn’t tell I masturbate, because they would think badly of me”. This reveals a discourse in society which still does not permit the visibility of women’s masturbation and prevents women from sharing their experiences and doubts.

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### **5.3.2 How do women masturbate?**

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All the women in our study who masturbate started with clitoral stimulation, only external, sometimes without direct touching, for example with the shower, or by stroking against something, and (in masturbation) they have an orgasm when they

want it. As demonstrated by Shere Hite, for most women masturbation is synonymous with orgasm (Hite, 1976), so Anna, who sporadically touches herself but never gets to orgasm, declares that she doesn't masturbate. In masturbation there is no confusion between pleasure and orgasm, in fact it is generally attributed to "sexual needs".

Some women felt the need to clarify in the interview that they wouldn't penetrate themselves when masturbating, as if it was something strange or abnormal. Probably due to the lack of communication and visibility of female masturbation, women ignore how other women masturbate. According to the findings of Shere Hite, the vast majority of women masturbate only by external stimulation (with many variations such as open or closed legs, moving the hand or the body against something) (Hite, 1976), but this basic notion seems to be neglected by the majority of women. Anna insists that she never masturbates: "sometimes I stimulate my clitoris, but I cannot penetrate myself, I never could, so I always stop before reaching the climax". So she seems to connect masturbation completely with penetration and orgasm, applying "male canons" to the "normal" idea of it.

This myth of masturbation through penetration is also popular among men. Miriam admits that her orgasms, even with a partner, have always been "clitoral", as with her masturbation, but at the beginning this really shocked her current partner, who completely ignored the importance of the clitoris, starting from a false idea of how a woman would masturbate.

"For example my boyfriend, before knowing me was convinced that women would masturbate with something that would be there in place of the penis, in order to have a sort of penetration. But as far as I know it is not like this... I

think that the majority of men still expects women to come through penetration, even my boyfriend still has the ideal of the perfect relationship incorporating vaginal orgasm” (Miriam).

We can therefore see how the taboo on women’s masturbation operates to maintain the secret of how they usually give themselves an orgasm, while creating the expectation in both men and women of “penetration” and of a “vaginal orgasm”.

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### **5.3.3 How is masturbation connected to orgasm in a (hetero) sexual relation?**

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The majority of the young women interviewed seem prepared to abandon masturbation once they are in a relationship. Carmen is the only one who says that she never masturbated as she never felt the need for it.

“I had my first boyfriend kind of very early, at 13, and I continued to have boyfriends nearly always. I mean... since I always lived sex as a burden, when alone I would just do other things... I always saw masturbation as something linked to sex, and for me sex has always been a kind of job” (Carmen).

Due to her precocious start in mutual sexual life she exclusively lives sexuality as something to be shared, so it was always through somebody else that she discovered her sexuality. As we have seen, it is quite a common thought that masturbation is a “normal” and positive practice, but only when “no one else is around” (Linda) or “if nothing better comes to hand” (Franca). So, once in a relationship, it is abandoned, not integrated as a possibility between many others, joining the presence of another person. So the majority of the young women of our study have never touched

themselves in front of their partners, and never even considered it as a possibility. For example, Celeste said that since she has been in a stable relationship, for approximately two years, she never masturbated, even when they didn't see each other for months and she knew her boyfriend did masturbate. In her words: "it's just that I don't need it. When I'm with him I prefer that he touches me... I never touched myself in front of him, I think I wouldn't feel comfortable, or, well, I never felt the instinct to do it" (Celeste). While she recognizes that he stimulates himself alone, she never thought about why she wouldn't do it. This could be due to the "couple imperative" or the construction of (hetero) sexuality through the idea that "an orgasm with someone else is better than one by yourself" (Potts, 2000, p. 65). But of course, this affects women much more than men, since men receive in penis-vagina intercourse a similar stimulation to when they masturbate (Hite, 1976). While for women there is a radical distinction between "sexual intercourse", or vaginal stimulation, and "masturbation" which is mostly clitoral. Only Vittoria and Miriam acknowledge that they stimulate themselves in front of their partner, and that it is a normal practice, part of the sexual life of a couple, but this seems to be rather the exception.

Many authors support the strong correlation between masturbation and orgasm in the (hetero) sexual relation: Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis showed that "those women who never masturbated before the start of sexual relations, are less likely to reach an orgasm, compromising the realization of a satisfactory sexual

life”<sup>25</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 235, my translation). In fact, if the woman herself doesn’t know how to reach an orgasm, and is even uncomfortable with her body, it is going to be difficult with a partner; despite the still existing stereotype that the partner’s hands are more experts, they will generally be “even more rough and ignorant”<sup>26</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 238, my translation). So the fact of not having a sexuality of one’s own will leave the woman in a position of dependence on her partner, who is illogically presumed to teach her what she likes, but generally imposes what she should like.

In the words of the Boston Collective: “For many of us learning to masturbate has meant to rediscover sex” (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1971, p. 47), since they felt the empowerment of discovery and the legitimization of admitting which touches they liked, where, in which situation and even put them into practice themselves. Only through knowledge of themselves, gained through masturbation, will women be able to be active in their pleasure, even in a sexual relation. Unfortunately it is not the majority of women who transfer personal knowledge about themselves and their pleasure in the sexual relation, probably due to the taboo on women’s masturbation. In fact this discourse is perpetrated through silence and interdiction about it, while space is given to other discourses such as the myth of the vaginal orgasm or the male sexual drive. So the clear knowledge of how to have an orgasm is

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<sup>25</sup> “Le donne che non si sono masturbate prima dell’inizio dei rapporti sessuali, piu difficilmente riusciranno a raggiungere l’orgasmo, pregiudicando cosi la realizzazione di una vita sessuale soddisfacente”.

<sup>26</sup> “Ancora piu rozze e ignoranti”.

then abandoned, abdicated toward what the sexual relation can give: mostly penis-vagina intercourse with all that entails.

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## 5.4 THE MYTH OF THE VAGINAL ORGASM<sup>27</sup>

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In the passage from masturbation to a (hetero) sexual relation some terms and expectations change. In fact the young women of our study start making a distinction between pleasure and orgasm (this distinction is not present in masturbation), and a difference between clitoral orgasm and vaginal orgasm (not present in masturbation). Are cultural beliefs impeding the use of knowledge about one self acquired through masturbation (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005), and even imposing a “mythical standard against which women measure themselves”? (Nicolson and Burr, 2003, p. 1743).

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### 5.4.1 “Sex” as penis-vagina intercourse and the expectation of the “vaginal orgasm”

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I will talk about “sexual relations” to refer to whatever practice that is incorporated in a sexual exchange between two people<sup>28</sup>. The use of the term “sex” or “sexual intercourse” as univocally meaning penis-vagina-intercourse has been problematized by many authors (Hite, 1976, Jackson, 1984, McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2001), but during the interviews I registered that they retain their currency in everyday language. The women interviewed maintained a clear distinction between

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<sup>27</sup> The expression “myth of the vaginal orgasm” was coined by Anne Koedt in 1970.

<sup>28</sup> In the whole thesis I only talk about sexual relations between two people and not more, since experiences different to this did not emerge in the interviews.

“foreplay”, or all sexual behaviours which do not correspond to coitus (such as manual or oral stimulations, kisses or hugging) (Fabris and Davis, 1978), and “coitus”, or, as I will call it here “penis-vagina intercourse” (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005). In the majority of cases this linguistic division concretized itself in a “chronological order” with foreplay preceding coitus (Hite, 1976, McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2003), and a “hierarchical value”, attributing to penis-vagina intercourse more importance than any other practice, with both a stable partner and, especially, with an occasional one. So when entering a (hetero) sexual relation women generally expect to pass through penis-vagina intercourse as the main course of the sexual exchange (Jackson, 1984), even though it might not be the most pleasurable activity to them (Hite, 1976). In fact women are led to accept a switch from the clitoral stimulation operated by themselves (or short-term by the partner during “foreplay”) to a vaginal stimulation operated by their partner. The “coital imperative” works through the expectation that both partners can obtain equal pleasure and orgasm from it. So society is still pervaded by the (mythical) expectation that the female partner should orgasm through coitus, otherwise she is not normal (Nicolson and Burr, 2003) and her partner cannot demonstrate his virility. In fact the “vaginal orgasm” is generally seen as the male partner’s responsibility, since women rarely penetrate themselves in masturbation (Hite, 1976) and the discourse around the male sexual drive depicts men as the more naturally “sexperts” (Potts, 1998, p. 528).

As a consequence, from the accounts of several women interviewed, the belief in a difference between orgasms, clitoral and vaginal, emerged, the latter being represented as “better”. Even those who didn’t agree with this division (two) were aware of the popularity of this discourse. No matter that in 1966 Masters and Johnson

revealed that all orgasms start from the clitoris, and that over 70% of women are not likely to reach an orgasm through penis-vagina intercourse alone (Hite, 1976), the infamous distinction in clitoral and vaginal orgasm is still widespread and permeates the minds of young women. Even those who have still not experienced it see it as an important goal in their sexual lives, otherwise they feel (once again) “abnormal”<sup>29</sup>. So even though the real “normality” is that women do not orgasm during penis-vagina-intercourse alone, this basic notion is reversed into the expectation that the “vaginal orgasm” should be even better than the “clitoral” one. In the words of Miriam: “At the beginning I had more expectations for the penetration, I thought that the pleasure from the clitoris was just the beginning of the pleasure, and then I would have a greater pleasure through penetration”.

Due to this logic women are actually brought to abdicate the clitoral knowledge acquired through years of masturbation, in order to wait for the mysterious “vaginal orgasm”. As we have seen before<sup>30</sup>, the majority of the women interviewed are still ashamed of touching themselves in front of their partner, so they do not even consider the possibility of combining coitus with clitoral stimulation, as suggested by Shere Hite (1976). In addition I registered the idea that stimulating the clitoris would be “cheating”, defeating the principle of a purely “vaginal orgasm”. For example Vittoria practices the stimulation of her clitoris during intercourse as a normal event and, strangely or not, she is the one who recalls having orgasms in nearly every sexual relation; but still she sees it as a replacement for the vaginal orgasm: “I have a very

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<sup>29</sup> See paragraph 5.4.3 “Am I abnormal?”.

<sup>30</sup> See paragraph 5.3.3 “How is masturbation connected to orgasm in a (hetero) sexual relation?”.

good percentage of orgasms [she laughs], but really it's 'cause I provoke my orgasm, through stimulation of my clitoris during intercourse... if not... I don't have vaginal orgasms".

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#### **5.4.2 Male virility and women's inhibition**

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In some cases the expectation of the "vaginal orgasm" can become a stressful pressure from the male partner, who sees in it the realization of his virility (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2003). Carmen never masturbated to orgasm by herself, since she started engaging in relationships very early and always lived sexuality through them, never as something personal (Bellamy and co., 2011). So, for her, pleasure and orgasm are both strictly connected to a sexual exchange. With her last boyfriend she began to live orgasm as a "nightmare" due to his insistence:

"He wanted me to come during every sexual intercourse or he wouldn't be satisfied. I told him many times that I didn't really care, but he wanted it more for himself, as a proof of virility let's say... He really tried with all means to give me pleasure, but it hardly ever worked. Also, I would start sex with the idea that if I didn't come we would have a argument, so I nearly always faked, to maintain peace... ah, and he wanted us to come at the same time, he would tell me when he was nearly there, so I would have the time to start simulating" (Carmen).

When I asked her for more precise explanations of what "tried with all means" meant she said: "changing a lot of places in the house, positions etc.." (Carmen), and when I insisted asking her whether they had tried manual stimulation of the clitoris she

seemed surprised and answered: “mmmh, maybe a few times, but I never had problems with external orgasms, apart from with him, who was not delicate at all, so it would hurt more than give pleasure”. So the problem of her orgasm was the need for a purely “vaginal orgasm”, not any kind of orgasm. Also, it had to be reached through penis-vagina intercourse, or it didn’t count, *and* it wouldn’t be looked for. Franca had a similar experience with her second sexual partner, who was obsessed with the idea that “vaginal orgasm should be better, or it meant he didn’t have a big enough penis... I told him many times that I was fine... no need for... but he just wouldn’t believe me” (Franca). In both Carmen and Franca’s cases the two of them never questioned the existence of a “vaginal orgasm”, but it is mostly their partners who felt concerned about their (vaginal) orgasm, whose lack was lived as a personal failure for their virility (Nicolson and Burr, 2003). In fact the active-passive dichotomy constructs the penis as “the primary organ for sexual pleasure for both sexes” (Jackson, 1984 cited in Caplan, 1987, p. 73), so the lack of (vaginal) orgasm testifies to a weak performance of the male (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2003) and not to the lack of correct/preferred stimulation (Hite, 1976). This is, of course, a crucial distinction which still seems to go unnoticed, due to the acceptance of women of the (active) role of “passivity”.

Some studies have demonstrated how “knowledge” of the clitoris correlates significantly with the frequency of women’s orgasm in masturbation, but not in a (hetero) sexual exchange (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005): this means that this knowledge is totally abandoned when entering (hetero) sexual intercourse. So not only can women not act on it themselves (as we have already seen) but do not even feel the right to ask for clitoral stimulation from their partner. This builds the

paradox/tension that women are expected to be orgasmic during penis-vagina intercourse, but that they shouldn't be either active in this process or ask for it (Wade, Kremer and Brown, 2005). So women still feel inhibited in touching themselves in front of their partner, but also in telling their partners what they like. Femininity is still constructed as receptive instead of active (Hite, 1976, Lonzi, 1977). This is demonstrated by a few accounts from the young women of our study.

"I am not very likely to guide, or explain, I prefer to leave the partner to 'do', taking the initiative" (Carmen).

"Sometimes I wish we had sex in a wilder way, I think about it, I'd like to say it but I cannot, I feel ashamed.. um, I cannot transform my thoughts into words. I hope someday I'll be able to do it" (Celeste).

"I didn't have many orgasms in my life... ummm but few people noticed it. You know before if they didn't ask I wouldn't start a conversation about it, like telling what I like from the beginning, just sometimes when the guys were too brutal" (Anna).

The women in our study are more socialized to wait for their partner to act, and this might be lived as rewarding due to the discourse privileging vaginal/passive/receptive women (Lonzi, 1977), but of course this reduces their possibilities to decide on their orgasm. Having to accept what the partner proposes, they learn to like what their partner likes, and if they don't, they feel abnormal, since they don't feel the power to like what they like full stop. (Hetero) sexuality is still male-based, the "myth of the vaginal orgasm" legitimates the desire of men and the "male control of sex" (Potts,

2000, p. 72), while women have no means for affirming what they like, since it has generally nothing to do with the “vaginal orgasm”. The problem is that women still cannot trust themselves in the matter of orgasm, they are influenced by society to wait for something “mythical” that is outside their bodies (Potts, 2000). They become dependent on their male partners who should actively give them an orgasm, nearly imposing it on their bodies, which are passive, receptive, waiting. This often leaves women unsatisfied.

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#### 5.4.3 Am I abnormal?

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In these conditions, when women feel incapable of accomplishing their partner’s and society’s expectations, the position left available for them to occupy is the feeling of “abnormality”, which was a recurrent term during my interviews. Women tend to place themselves in a “dysfunctional category” (Nicolson and Burr, 2003, p. 1736).

“I don’t know if it’s me who is abnormal or if I haven’t found the right guy yet”  
(Carmen)

“I always thought that it was my problem [the lack of pleasure in sex], if it wasn’t with him it would have been with another one” (Anna)

“In my first sexual relation I was convinced something was wrong with me, since I would only have pleasure through the clitoris” (Vittoria).

“I didn’t know much about clitoral, vaginal... but with my first real boyfriend I would never come when we did it, so I was a bit worried... I talked about it with my sister and she told me that some day it would come” (Celeste).

For some women not reaching an orgasm through penis-vagina intercourse can become a problem, a source of anxiety and feeling of abnormality. The paradox is that this feeling is completely connected to the expectation of the “vaginal orgasm”, even when women admit that they can easily have “clitoral orgasms” during masturbation and with a partner when the correct/preferred stimulation is provided. So the same women who reported feelings of “abnormality” have in other part of the interview talked about ways in which they can have orgasms:

“I never had problems with external orgasms [meaning “clitoral”]” (Carmen).

“The first time I had an orgasm was with oral sex, this is a way in which I get to orgasm very well [she laughs]” (Anna).

“I have a very good percentage of orgasm [she laughs], but really it’s ‘cause I provoke my orgasm, through stimulation of my clitoris during intercourse” (Vittoria).

“Oh well, I didn’t have orgasms with intercourse, I might have them in other ways” (Celeste).

Their experience perfectly reflects the suppression of their orgasmic potential, simply because the ways in which they do orgasm are not looked for. In fact, as demonstrated by Shere Hite (1976), considering that both partners should reach an orgasm through the penis-vagina intercourse prevents many women from actually being able to attain

them; in fact generally the stimulation that is for them the most pleasurable stimulation is often abandoned, since entering in the category “foreplay”, a preparation for coitus. So this reveals how, when women accept (trying to) come during penis-vagina intercourse it is a “psychosocial adaptation” (Lonzi, 1977, p.127) instead of the psychosexual development argued by Freud (Lonzi, 1977), since it does not fit the physiology of their bodies. The absence of reliable sources of information and the possibility to share experiences with other women, leads many of the young women interviewed to think that it might be only their problem, thus provoking a sense of loneliness and desperation. Due to the discourses available to them, women cannot rely on alternative versions of sexual harmony, more responsive to her needs. The “technologies of the self”<sup>31</sup> put into practice by women seem to be: seeing “pleasure” as good enough for them, or faking<sup>32</sup>.

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#### **5.4.4 The division of orgasm and pleasure in a (hetero) sexual relation**

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The myth of the vaginal orgasm may also be connected to the distinction between “pleasure” and “orgasm” that women start to make when talking about (hetero) sexual intercourse. This could be an empowering concept, which provides an escape from the vision of sexuality as a purely “genital exchange” (Fabris and Davis, 1978), moving towards a more comprehensive vision of the potentiality of the whole body. On the other hand this division become suspicious when it becomes an “either/or” concept, and it is recognized only by women, as if it was a “feminine”

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<sup>31</sup> See paragraph 4.5.3 “Agency”.

<sup>32</sup> Of course there is also the possibility of “acting upon their orgasm” but I will not consider it here, since it is not a widespread practice.

characteristic. In fact, in some cases, “pleasure” is seen as enough only for women, while men have to get to orgasm (or at least ejaculation)<sup>33</sup> in any case (Barbagli and co., 2010). We will see how this applies to the women of our studies through their own words.

“I like having sex, and I get pleasure from it, but I very rarely have orgasms with it. But for me it is not a big problem. If I get there, I’m happy, if not I’m happy anyway since it is something I like” (Anna).

“Pleasure can be only when someone is touching you, an orgasm without orgasm... In one of my last experiences with an occasional partner, he did everything with hands and tongue, he didn’t want penetration. At the beginning my first thought was ‘he doesn’t like me’, but he insisted that he didn’t need penetration, he just had pleasure by touching me... Wow, I didn’t think it was possible for a man” (Franca).

“I love to touch, to massage umm the body in all its parts, I find it very sensual... pleasure is more like the fusion of the bodies, you know, just by seeing the other having pleasure makes me feel proud... But it never happened to me that a male partner would do the same thing that I did, just wanting to touch and give pleasure without caring about one’s own orgasm” (Vittoria).

The discrepancy is shown by the fact that, even though women value pleasure more than orgasm, they do not believe this possible for men. So while they are ready to renounce the obligation of orgasm for the sake of pleasure, the orgasm of the male

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<sup>33</sup> See paragraph 5.5 “Men have more sexual needs”.

cannot be renounced (no matter how much pleasure they have already given). Again, it is not the definition of “pleasure” given by women that is problematic, but rather the gender differentiation that this concept of “pleasure” entails, supporting the belief that men need an orgasm more than women. So those women who enter into this “either/or” discourse of pleasure and orgasm actually abandon the possibility of orgasm for themselves but secure it for their male partner. This vision is based on the stereotype that for men pleasure equals orgasm (that equals ejaculation, that equals coitus, Barbagli and co., 2010), while for women pleasure and orgasm are different, and orgasm is “optional”, or “biologically” less needed (Cvajner, 2010). This vision provides an excuse for forgetting the orgasm of women.

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#### **5.4.5 When young women simulate an orgasm**

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The Italian research of 2010 (Barbagli and co., 2010) shows that the simulation of the orgasm is still a widely used practice among Italian women of all ages<sup>34</sup>. Among the eight women I interviewed four of them have practiced it in the course of their lives. It is, of course, linked to the myth of the vaginal orgasm, the coitus and orgasm imperative, since it is practiced only during penis-vagina intercourse. The reasons expressed by the women interviewed are in line with those reported by other studies, such as: to avoid hurting the partner’s sense of “virility”, wanting sex to end, avoiding a conflict with the partner (Hite, 1976, Fabris and Davis, 1978, Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010).

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<sup>34</sup> To the question about the frequency of the simulation of orgasm during their life, women answered: Often 7%, Sometimes 38%, few times 20%, never 35% (Barbagli and co., 2010, p. 247).

“In faking I’m very good, I’m the queen. I had to learn because my boyfriend would get angry if I didn’t come.. he felt this lack as a failure for him as a man, and he was always saying that all his previous partners came at every intercourse.. but as he didn’t notice I would simulate, he might not have noticed with others... I started every sexual relation with the thought if I don’t come we’ll have an argument, so I simulated the majority of times, in order not to argue” (Carmen).

The case of Carmen demonstrates a kind of paradox; on the one hand the partner is interested in her orgasm, but on the other hand he imposes a demand on her to have an orgasm during every sexual intercourse, ignoring her real needs and wishes. In fact he seems more concerned than her, due to the fact that her orgasm is evidence of his performance as a good lover (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2003). But this pressing expectation creates a kind of “orgasm anxiety”, which denies her the possibility of having sporadic but relaxed orgasms. Instead of a possibility orgasm becomes an obligation (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey, 2003), and, especially, it has to be attained through penis-vagina intercourse. This tense atmosphere can bring some women to (actively) simulate an orgasm, since faking an orgasm through penis-vagina intercourse is more highly rewarded than looking for a real orgasm in another way, or simply choosing not to have an orgasm without simulation. “Activity” or “asking for an orgasm” does not qualify as “properly feminine” (Wade, Kremer, Brown, 2005, p. 136), so the idea of guiding the partner is still lived as a difficult possibility. This is shown even better in the next quotation:

“With a potential partner, or a prospective partner, maybe he tried, he put all his efforts [in penis-vaginal intercourse] but he failed [in bringing her to orgasm], so for this time is okay.. But at the beginning it’s not good to guide the guy, ‘cause he might start feeling the pressure and have problems with erections... the first time it’s better to reassure him, make him think that it was a great performance, then little by little, maybe the third or fourth time, you start giving suggestions and demand a real orgasm... there were times that I just didn’t have an orgasm but I liked it, but the guys perceive it as a consolation prize, so the next time is worse, so it becomes an anxiety performance and the next time they don’t even have an erection” (Linda).

Linda consciously decides to fake an orgasm with potential partners since she assumes that, especially at the beginning, the partner wouldn’t like to be guided, because it might be perceived as an attack on his virility. Therefore in these two cases (Carmen and Linda’s) the faking is brought about by the fact that women care about their partner, don’t want to disappoint them and their expectation of vaginal orgasm, undermining their virility. In addition, the solution of simulation can be adopted with an occasional partner.

“Maybe I was drunk, and very tired, you know, maybe before when we were dancing I felt excited, but then once I got to the place I just would have preferred to sleep, but then there I was, so... I would simulate an orgasm to fasten the intercourse, you know, just open my legs and let him relieve himself” (Linda).

“I only faked at the beginning of my sexual encounters... it would hurt a lot, but I didn’t want to say so because I thought it was normal, so I faked in order to excite him more and that he would finish quickly” (Vittoria).

In both cases the simulation is planned in order to quickly finish an undesired or non pleasurable sexual encounter. The young women concerned don’t see the possibility of just stopping the intercourse if it is undesired, they feel obliged to “stay there” until the male partner ejaculates, even though it is an occasional partner and they have no feelings for him. Due to the construction of masculinity as more needy they see the male orgasm/ejaculation as an obligation; for example Linda assumes that a man would always want to have sex even if drunk and tired.

Orgasm may also be simulated silently (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010); for example Franca who does not like to scream when she has an orgasm has sometimes told her partner that she has had an orgasm, probably in order to end the sexual encounter without disappointing the partner.

“I might have had pleasure, but not arrived at an orgasm, but okay, I would feel fine, but I would say I had an orgasm in order to reassure the partner. So we could pass to another activity, for example going out or something” (Franca).

It follows that when the women of our study feel obliged to have an orgasm, it is never for their own good (or it wouldn’t be an obligation), but rather because of the discourses around masculinity and the role of the penis as the provider of pleasure for both partners. In fact the obligation of orgasm comes without providing the correct/preferred context or material stimulation. So the faking of orgasm is a consequence of the co-existence of different discourses: the taboo of women

masturbation resulting in the impossibility of women being “active”, the myth of the vaginal orgasm or the obligation to orgasm during penis-vagina intercourse for both partners, *and* the construction of masculinity as always in need of sex and their virility depending on the orgasm of the female. A woman can fake an orgasm only when she doesn’t count on herself to get it and, also, doesn’t want to ask her partner to stimulate her, since she doesn’t want to put pressure on the partner: “To expect orgasm would amount to a pressure on a man and a demand from a woman. Essentially, women considered their sexual desire as secondary to men’s” (Nicolson and Burr, 2003, p. 1743). In addition, the faking of an orgasm can happen only if the woman considers her pleasure to be less important than the male’s, and if she has a strict idea of a “normal” sexual relation as penis-vagina intercourse. Faking orgasm therefore fits into a definition of “femininity” in which women reassure their partner about their performance but do not “act” on their own orgasm with knowledge other than that derived from penis-vagina intercourse (such as clitoral) (Wade, Kremer, Brown, 2005). Due to inhibition in explaining to the partner the correct stimulation some women prefer faking.

Furthermore “faking can only work because of this representation - it is far easier to make a bit of noise than, for example, to fake a vaginal spasm” (Roberts and co., 1995, p. 529). As a consequence, if there was more knowledge about how women really have an orgasm, and people learned to listen to the signals of the whole body, instead of the mere sound, the simulation wouldn’t be possible (and probably even unnecessary).

## 5.5 MEN HAVE MORE SEXUAL NEEDS

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From the accounts of the young women interviewed a model of masculinity as more in need of sex and easier to be sexually satisfied emerged. Some authors have called it the “male sexual drive” discourse (Hollway, 1984). This is strictly connected to the “biological model of sexuality”<sup>35</sup>, where men’s sexuality is seen as “directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species. The discourse is everywhere in common-sense assumptions and is reproduced and legitimised by experts, including psychologists” (Hollway, 1984, p. 273). Therefore, for the majority of the women interviewed, men in general are thought to be more carried by the tide of “instinct” and to have a stronger sexual drive than women. This of course is related to power relations/agency in the sexual act. This discourse is interiorized from puberty, when young girls learn that, despite their impossibility of admitting their masturbation, it is normal that boys masturbate, or at least “normalised” since boys are allowed to talk about it<sup>36</sup>. So women learn to accept male sexual needs and negate their own; this will continue later, when masturbation is acquired as a positive practice, and women are proud to reveal their sexual wishes and libido<sup>37</sup>. They still allow men “more”, and, for this reason, men’s rights/needs to orgasm and less attachment to feelings are recognized. The widespread belief that this is due to “nature” causes women to indulge in certain aspects (such as with regards to their own orgasm) that they probably wouldn’t if they didn’t believe it to be so. This

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<sup>35</sup> See paragraph 3.5 “The ‘biological’ model of sexuality”.

<sup>36</sup> See paragraph 5.3.1 “The taboo of women masturbation despite its unspoken popularity”.

<sup>37</sup> This evidence emerged from the interviews in different accounts, which I’m unfortunately not able to quote here.

discourse was reported by the young women interviewed both in a context of a stable (hetero) sexual relation and, especially, in that of a one-night-stand.

“Men have the physical need to masturbate, more than women, because if men do not have an orgasm after a certain time they have pain” (Anna).

“For men is something more... mmmh... physical, while for women more psychological... Women do not need to fuck every day, while men do” (Carmen).

“Men always want to have sex, and they would even ‘finish’ very fast if they could” (Linda).

As we can see, the sexuality of men is represented as more “physical”, “natural”, normally “easier”, or “unproblematic” (Nicolson and Burr, 2003). The women interviewed assume that with penis-vagina intercourse men will get to orgasm, while they don’t expect the same thing for themselves. A comparison always seem to be made between women’s libido and the male, privileging the latter for “physical” reasons. The following quote shows this:

“I think that if he [her current stable partner] goes too long without an orgasm he gets over excited and difficult to control, so it is important to me that he gets an orgasm, especially when it has been a long time since we have seen each other. So in this case I really concentrate on his orgasm, not much on the whole pleasure or atmosphere” (Miriam).

Due to her beliefs about male sexuality, Miriam puts the sexual needs of her partner over her own, a tendency demonstrated by other studies (Nicolson and Burr, 2003).

Another aspect of this discourse is that men are positioned as “‘naturally’ knowing ‘sexperts’ – the masters of the technique- in the sexual encounter” (Potts, 1998, p. 155). Therefore this other myth creates the expectation among the majority of women that men should know more about sexuality, even in respect to women’s physiology and pleasure. This is clearly false, despite the continuing belief that the partner’s hands are more experts, they’ll generally be “even more rough and ignorant”<sup>38</sup> (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 238, my translation).

“Especially at the beginning, yeah, I expected the partner would know what to do, you know which parts to stimulate... Of course then you understand that it’s not at all true. But, I mean, at the beginning I was shy... so I wouldn’t have known what to ask... I had really big expectation for my ‘first time’, but, ahem, I didn’t like it at all!” (Franca).

On the one hand the expectation left on the shoulders of the male saves women from some kind of performance anxiety, but on the other hand prevents them from introducing into the sexual exchange knowledge about their own bodies. So their choices become limited to the ones proposed by their partners. In fact, women are encouraged to trust their partner, but he cannot know for himself whether the myth of the vaginal orgasm is real or not. Women, meanwhile, can, but do not trust themselves (Hite, 1976).

Especially in one-night-stands it is very difficult to get out of the mechanical logic of penis-vagina intercourse (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). The fact of it being a “new” situation with a “stranger”, “drive[s] people to behave more gender typical”

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<sup>38</sup> “Ancora piu rozze e ignoranti”.

(Vanwesenbeeck, 2009, p. 124), so as to conform more to social expectations. Therefore most of the women of our study do not expect to orgasm on a one-night-stand; if it happens it is more a surprise, while not having to wait for the male ejaculation is something extraordinary. In addition these women noticed that generally men do care about their own orgasm, while for themselves behaving more gender typical means being more “feminine” or “passive”.

“Generally there is no communication [in a one-night-stand], you know, you don’t know each other, so you only think about your own orgasm, in particular the male” (Franca).

“In an occasional relation I generally noticed that the man would think more about himself, such as satisfying some kind of ‘psycho-physic’ needs... Everything stops with ejaculation” (Vittoria).

So, especially in a one-night-stand, the women interviewed adhere to the “biological” model of sexual relations according to which the sexual exchange terminates with the “visible” male ejaculation (Jackson, 1984), a “natural” and “incontrovertible” event (Cvajner, 2010, p. 237). From their accounts I noticed how it is taken for granted that for males “ejaculation” is synonymous with “orgasm”<sup>39</sup> (Cvajner, 2010), which makes it impossible for males to fake orgasms and impossible for women not to notice if the man doesn’t reach an orgasm. So, while women were completely familiar with the idea

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<sup>39</sup> During the first interview I conducted I ended up discussing with the woman interviewed about the difference between orgasm and ejaculation for males. So I then started to pose this interrogative to all the other interviewees, and I found that all the women believed in the equation between ejaculation and orgasm for males. This same belief develops in the impossibility of believing that men can simulate orgasms too, which none of the women had ever thought of.

that women fake orgasm (even for those who didn't), they had never heard of the possibility of men faking orgasms. In fact this subject has barely been studied (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010), but it has recently been demonstrated that men can ejaculate without orgasm, in fact "ejaculation and orgasm are separate events that usually occur closely together" (Heidelbaugh and co., 2007, p. 270), but the fact remains that they are not the same thing. Nevertheless this knowledge is very far from being widespread, for example in the Italian research of 2010 Marzio Barbagli and colleagues posed the question of the simulation of orgasms only to women. In 1978 Giampaolo Fabris and Rowena Davis reported that 18% of men admitted that they simulate an orgasm from time to time<sup>40</sup>. This is particularly relevant since disclosing the possibility of men faking orgasms might discredit the myth of the male sexual drive, revealing that male sexuality is not as easy and "hydraulic" (Jackson, 1984) as the dominant discourse pretends it to be. Less men than women find themselves in need of simulating orgasms, since the coitus imperative favours types of stimulation preferred by them (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010), but even this small number reveals the psychological pressure on them, due to the expectation of their partner of ejaculation. In addition "the male sexual drive" discourse deprives men of the possibility of aspiring to something more than ejaculation, such as general (sexual) "pleasure"; in fact women are led to believe that "ejaculation" says it all, this event is enough to decide that the sexual relation was satisfactory for the male. On the other hand it guarantees that women will provide their bodies until ejaculation, due to the erroneous representation of ejaculation as orgasm, which obliges women to wait until

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<sup>40</sup> The full results are: 76% of men say they never simulate an orgasm, 18% from time to time, 0% nearly always, 0% always, 0% not answering (Fabris and Davis, 1978, p. 223).

they “see”. While for men, since they are not educated to feel the symptoms of female orgasm, it is generally something “to ask” about when it is not heard through “sound”. Men, therefore, have the possibility to ask, or not to ask, to care or not to care, while women are socialized to wait in any case.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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1. The dominant model of sexuality of today does not give young women enough possibilities to express their sexuality outside the strictly genital penis-vagina logic. In fact the binary division of masturbation vs. sexual relation, foreplay vs. sex, clitoral vs. vaginal impede women from the possibility of living sexuality fully and freely.
2. The regime of ignorance and “sexual misery” is perpetuated by the absence of accessible and useful sources of knowledge about sexuality. Men and women are exposed to extremely gendered myths and false beliefs from childhood, which will constitute nearly their only source of information about sexuality. This will dominate their understanding of sexuality as full of gendered rules, roles and interdictions, rather than open possibilities.
3. The taboo of masturbation among young women prevents them from feeling comfortable with their own body and its functions. In addition it impedes women from exchanging personal experiences with other women, creating the “loneliness” of sexuality and the impossibility of knowing that the problems due to mythical expectations are shared by many other women. Furthermore it encourages women to abandon their own knowledge, acquired through individual masturbation, when entering a (hetero) sexual relation.
4. The myth of the vaginal orgasm combined with the coital imperative causes expectations in women and men. When these are not met they will create, especially in women, a sense of abnormality. Normality in a (hetero)

sexual relation is still based on male standards.

5. Young women are encouraged to renounce orgasms that cannot be attained through penis-vagina intercourse, since they are valued less and are generally not looked for. They will consider their orgasm as optional, while maintaining that for the male partner it is an obligation.

6. The connection of the vaginal orgasm with the virility of the male partner places women in a difficult position when they don't have them, so they might as well simulate orgasms in order not to disappoint the partner, but once again renouncing all the others possible ways of attaining orgasms. The paradox of the new "orgasm obligation" is that the structure of how it should be reached is still that of the penis-vagina intercourse, even though many studies have demonstrated that this practice brings men to orgasm easily while only with difficulty for women without any other stimulation.

7. The young women of our study don't feel free to use their clitoral knowledge, and they still feel ashamed to admit their clitoral needs, since they don't enter into the (hetero) sexual expectation.

8. The young women of our study still don't see orgasm as a pleasurable possibility that they can control and reach whenever they want, alone or with a partner, with the stimulation they prefer, alone, with the partner or together.

9. Orgasm is lived as a pleasurable experience by all the women interviewed, so it should be a possibility for them.

10. Orgasm being a possibility means that it should be possible to choose it, or *not*. Some of the women interviewed do not feel free *not* to have an orgasm, due to its implications with male virility. Young women should as well have the

right *not* to have an orgasm as a part of a normal sexual relation, without feeling guilty or fearing to disappoint their partner.

11. Low acceptance of their own sexual needs and the subordination of them to male sexual needs prevent young women from living their sexuality freely and actively.

12. The male sexual drive discourse still attributes to the male more rights to orgasm and forces women to “stay there” until ejaculation even when they are not enjoying the sexual relation. It reduces the plurality of experiences that can be lived by men, and closes to men the possibility of living “pleasure” in a broader sense.

13. If women are socialized to appreciate sexuality in a broader sense than orgasm, it should be true for both partners.

14. Sexuality should be lived without binaries, rules, and fixity, but rather as a celebration of the exchange, fusion and pleasure between bodies. Everybody should have the right to know their own body and stop having taboos about practices or roles in order to enjoy their own sexual life, alone or with a partner.

15. Orgasm is gendered.

16. Such a wide field of studies opens many possibilities for future researches. Among them I suggest the study of men’s perspectives on the female orgasm; or as well an investigation of the male orgasm and the male simulation of orgasm. Furthermore, studies could be carried out about strategies or policies for rendering sexual information available to the population. In addition it might be challenging to compare the position of the orgasm in hetero sexual relations with homo sexual ones.

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