Sexual Pleasure:

An intimate journey

Rudo Chigudu

Across almost all societies, the notions of “pleasure” and “choice” are rarely mentioned or acknowledged as being among the most contentious aspects of human sexuality, particularly female sexuality. For many African women, even the suggestion that sexual pleasure and eroticism have political implications elicits alarm, and it is seldom recognised that sexual pleasure is fundamental to our right to a safe and wholesome lifestyle.

I n different societies, these contentious aspects of human sexuality manifest differently between sexes, races, religions, cultures and social classes. In my own non-academic exploration of the subject of sexual pleasure I sought to examine the pulsating and often secret human desire for sexual pleasure and alternatively the absence of such pleasure. Sexual pleasure comes in varied forms and is experienced very differently between individuals. Sexual expression and sexual inhibition manifest in a multiplicity of ways that one might easily observe in daily life. In this journey I looked inwards to unravel layers of intimate experiences of sexual pleasure and also looked outwardly in conversations with friends about their feelings and experiences. These experiences are moulded in various ways by context, socialisation, culture and religion among many other social factors in a way that also makes them play out differently for men and women.

I have likened sex to many other day-to-day activities but my favourite one is eating fruit salad.

Sex in a bowl

Imagine that sex was a fruit salad, filled with varying textures, smells and flavours. Imagine the whole process from the preparation of the ripened fruit to the tingle of anticipating taste buds to the sudden and unexpected taste of a despised fruit. Imagine the bursts of flavour as taste buds receive each juicy sweet piece of fruit. Imagine the subtlety of some flavours and the strength of others, the intensity of smells, the trickle of juices and the comfort offered by the simplicity of other fruits.

I wonder if the term ‘forbidden fruit’ developed from recognition of the amazing wonder that is the texture, sweetness, flavour and juiciness of fruit. The term ‘forbidden fruit’ tells a story of sex as a dirty, nasty and hidden experience. This of course has many variations. There are contexts where marriage is the one sanctioned space for sex and other places where sex outside of marriage is not demonized. Sex for money, same-sex sexual relationships, pregnancy as an undesired product of sex – all these are all hotly debated issues. The reasons why these are so contested are many and these can be explored more deeply at another time but for now let us return to the fruit salad. Each fruit represents a different sexual experience.

As one picks the ripened fruit, washing it gently so as not to bruise it:

Pear: Like breasts – soft, fleshy emerging into a nipple. Smooth but grainy a sensitive fruit with easily broken peels, fragile like our bodies. We can be split open, bruised, scraped...be aware but also connect with the tenderness of the pear, embracing vulnerability. A bruised body can become a source of pain and fear, pleasures taken away, sensual enjoyment gone. Don’t let anyone take away your pleasure, your sensual enjoyment.

Tomato: Be fully present in the moment, focus on the sensation of a tomato on the lips, flavours on the tongue, body becomes an anchor. Cut the tomato open and indulge all the senses...gaze at the lustre of the skin, the glistening seed inside, take a bite, let the integrity of its rich, tangy flavour fill you up. Explore the different layers of texture,
the slick surface surrounding the seeds, the glossy skin that snaps between your teeth, silky inner flesh, so complex beneath the smooth outer surface.

**Mango:** Peels and strips away masks, clothes peeling off like a mango. Letting the juices flow and licking them off your arms. Juicy and soft, a mango bite can slide down your throat lubricated by its abundant juices caressing the throat as it goes down.

**Avocado:** Goddess form, creamy and soft on the inside with a shell protecting the delicate and smooth interior.

**Papaya:** Flesh, slick and smooth and generous and slippery. Slice a bit of the flesh and feel its integrity, just as much as its soft strengths.

**Watermelon:** Slice, look at the fruit glistening inside, flesh falls into your lap, so willing to share itself. Let juices leak through your fingers, and onto your chin, one glorious bite after another. Press the sweet flesh against the roof of your mouth, releasing its flavour. Lick the sticky pulp from your palms.

**Pomegranate:** Cut them and see the vulva shaped inside and the seeds. The beauty of the female symbol, subtle scent.

Each deliciously fruity experience highlights how fragile and delicate sexual experiences can be and also how varied these experiences are. Whatever fruit one prefers may vary from day to day. The way the fruit is prepared and consumed also varies and it is this that is beautiful, sensual and erotic but it is also this that may reflect the displeasure, pain or violence that individuals experience. My sister is repelled by avocado but never has she sat me down to tell me how repulsive avocados are or how I should not consume them or enjoy them. Why then is there so much judgment surrounding sex, why are levels of homophobia so high? This is quite a simplistic example but even in that simplicity there is for me an interesting reality that might allow someone to think of sexual pleasure without being consumed by heterosexuality as the only ‘legitimate’ space for sexual expression and pleasure.

**Masturbation: My own dirty little secret**

Masturbation is a very common practice yet it is treated publicly as dirty and filthy. A lot of sexual self-discovery and awareness begins with masturbation yet it is publicly condemned. I long for the day when people no longer have to hush their voices in order to say the word ‘sex’. Below is the experience of a woman I had the privilege to engage with and who trusted a circle of sisters enough to share a very intimate experience.


**My Vacuum Cleaner**

Was sex only created for men to enjoy? What about us, do we not have feelings down there? What should I give my vagina, am I supposed to feed it with porridge?

We were created equally and yet as women, we are not supposed to admit that we have sexual urges. They say a good African woman is supposed to be well behaved and disciplined, only having sex in the missionary position. We are not supposed to initiate sex oh no, no, no, never! We are meant to lie down, quietly open our legs and let them have their way with us.

Well not me, not anymore. I used to wait and wait everyday hoping that the day would come when I would have an orgasm, pure sexual satisfaction but that day never arrived. He would have fun on his own, no consideration for me, without asking me if I was enjoying myself. Did I also cum? Did I want more? I had fourteen years of that shit, him always first, his pleasure always.

I decided to try something new and one day something crossed my path. I was holding my vacuum cleaner, it was strong and it vibrated heavily. It always gave me this sensation between my legs whenever it vibrated. I wondered – could there be more to it, more to the tingling sensation I felt? Then I closed my curtains and locked the door and then I switched on the storm. With just a small bit of contact between my legs, a sudden euphoria struck me and I sailed in deep pleasure.

After going through this sensation, I was proud that I could do it on my own. No need for lying still and satisfying someone while I am left with a deep, throbbing, burning desire. Behind closed doors, I can cum on my own.

I wondered what it meant for this woman to be able not only to touch herself, explore and reach what she felt was the highest level of sexual pleasure after many years of frustration but also to be able to verbalize it. In the moment of sharing, it ceased to be a dirty little secret and became a story of her sexual liberation and discovery of pleasure. Some fear that masturbation will make a partner redundant but I argue that it helps you understand your body better so as to better guide your partner about how to really pleasure you.

**Conclusion**

As one explores sexual pleasure, many issues surface, the social norms that exist around the issue as well as the impact of cultural and religious beliefs. Having recognised that ignoring the meaning and importance of sex and the pleasure resulting from it could lead to the disintegration of relationships this indicates that there is a clear need for communication around this ‘taboo’ issue. Communication in a relationship allows for individuals to better understand each other’s desires and work towards ensuring satisfaction for all parties involved.

This process involves crossing some boundaries where there is shame associated with asserting oneself sexually, particularly for women in heterosexual relationships where sex may be considered the agenda of the man. Other boundaries must also be crossed surrounding the how, when and where sex may occur as this breaks the monotony of having sex the same way and in the same place constantly. It is important for couples to find room to ‘sexplore’.

Environments that are socially enabling help to develop relationships; they nurture love and make intimacy between couples easier. The strain of an undesirable relationship makes love more difficult and strains a relationship which can make intimacy difficult. This is often the case with same sex relationships in contexts that are hostile; the fear and public inhibition can be strenuous. A same sex couple in a homophobic environment has to navigate very differently from accepted heterosexual couples.

However, all that being said, sex can provide the most intense pleasure when one is uninhibited, engaging with a partner of one’s choice and free to communicate one’s desires or when one is alone and free to explore. Sexual pleasure need not be a guilty pleasure and it should not matter what race, class, religion one belongs to or whom one has chosen to be intimate with. As juicy, sweet and succulent as a ripened fruit such is the joy of sexual pleasure. No one should take this away from you.

Rudo Chigudu is a feminist based in Zimbabwe. She is the coordinator of the Katswe Sistahood.