

*Original Article*

**Heterosexercising women's sexual pleasure in Finnish sex manuals**

**Abstract**

This article examines the ways in which heterosexual women's sexual pleasure becomes a subject of exercise in Finnish sex manuals published between 2005 and 2015. Our research focuses on the production of the heterosexual mindscape, and how women are encouraged to engage in exercise and adopt a heterosexual state of mind in order to increase their sexual pleasure. Our analysis demonstrates how power constitutes, through sex manuals, paradoxical subject positions for heterosexual women. These manuals take into account both gender and sexual equality for the sake of women's greater sexual enjoyment, but at the same time they continue to maintain gendered power imbalances and sexism. Throughout the article, we use the term 'heterosexercise' as an analytical tool to examine this complexity and to understand the production of heterosexuality as a state of mind.

**Keywords**

Gender equality, heterosexercise, heterosexuality, sex manuals, sexual equality

## **Heterosexercising women's sexual pleasure in Finnish sex manuals**

Several scholars have studied sex manuals to investigate how the understanding of gender and sexuality is conveyed in various historical contexts (e.g., Laipson, 1996; Neuhaus, 2000; Räisänen, 1995). A primary concern in Anglo-American feminist studies has been gender hierarchies and the institutionalisation of heterosexuality (Jackson, 1987). Similar questions are pertinent in studies of sex advice columns in women's magazines (Farvid and Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Tyler, 2004). In her research on sex manuals, Potts (1998) has argued that these reinforce power imbalances between heterosexual women and men by construing gendered differences as biological and natural. Moreover, Tyler (2008) has noted that biological determinism naturalises the sexual servicing of men by women, and Gupta and Cacchioni (2013) have suggested that in sex manuals, demands for sexual improvement target primarily women, not men. In short, heterosexual power imbalances and women's sexual oppression have been major concerns, and this has taken precedence over a perspective on the complexities of women's sexual subjectivities.

Nordic researchers have emphasised the importance of considering local histories of sexual politics and gender equality when examining gender and sexuality. In Nordic welfare states heterosexuality is framed in terms of state feminism and gender equality (Julkunen, 2016; Mühleisen, 2007). This women-friendly social policy is supported by reproductive rights, family leave, childcare services, open-handed social security, and easy access to public care services. These are the cornerstones of women's autonomy and mother-worker citizenship. (Anttonen, 1994; Julkunen, 2016: 237.) Overall, the Nordic model foregrounds the idea of equality in establishing the roles of women and men as citizens, earners, and parents (Julkunen, 2010: 224).

Public debates on the issues of gender equality, free abortion, distribution of contraception, and public sex education began in Finland during the 1960s with the sexual liberation movement. The initiatives led by activists resulted in the first national programme on sexual policy. (Helén and Yesilova, 2006: 264.) Overall, Finnish sexual policy centres on questions of sexual health, sexual autonomy, and sexual equality, with public sex education having played a significant role in promoting these values (Helen and Yesilova, 2006). This is the backdrop against which we place our study of Finnish sex manuals when we ask in what ways Finnish sex manuals encourage heterosexual women to modify their thoughts and attitudes in order to increase their sexual pleasure.

First, we provide a brief overview of the theories of sexuality and heterosexuality on which this article relies. Next, we introduce the data and the type of thematic analysis used in our study. In the analysis, we focus on the themes of both gender and sexual equality, and analyse the ways in which women are encouraged to engage in exercises and adopt a heterosexual mindset. Finally, we address the main findings in the discussion and argue that on the one hand, the analysed sex manuals offer the possibility of gender and sexual equality, while on the other hand, they continue to support established forms of gendered power relations and sexism.

## **Gender, sexuality, and heterosexual practices**

Women's sexual rights and sexual equality have a pivotal role in feminist theorising of sexual practices. Previous studies have revealed that male-centred and gender hierarchical discourses of sexuality restrict women's sexual desires, pleasures, and women's sexual subjectivities as a whole (e.g., Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Fine, 1988; Jackson and Scott, 2001; Tolman, 2012). This lack of women's sexual subjectivity has been located in sexual objectification, sexual harassment, and sexual violence (Fahs, 2011; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1998). Such limitations to women's sexual subjectivities leave little room for women's desires, pleasures, and sexual activities.

Along with the visibility of men's sexual needs, the significance of women's sexual activity and pleasure has been widely acknowledged in Western societies in recent decades. However, these changes have also exposed contradictions in the assumption of women's sexual freedom. Feminist scholars have recently investigated postfeminist models of sexual agency and noticed that such models do not necessarily contest traditional, dominant constructions of gender hierarchies (Frith, 2015; Gill, 2009). Rather, they reduce women's sexual agency unilaterally to a requirement to 'be sexy'. In addition to this intensified requirement of sexiness, several studies have also highlighted how women are encouraged to work on and to exercise their sexuality. Gender hierarchies persist here also when women in particular are asked to do gendered work on their sexuality, sexual pleasure, and orgasm. (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010; Frith, 2015; Gill, 2009.) Therefore, researchers have argued that postfeminist views of women's active sexuality and pleasure re-establish traditional, gendered power relations in various ways (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2009; Gill and Elias 2014; Tolman, 2012). Consequently, acknowledgement of women's sexual pleasure and activity does by no means translate automatically to realising women's sexual rights and sexual equality.

Women's sexual activity has become an achieved entitlement on the one hand, and an obligation on the other hand (Braun et al., 2003: 254–256), one that demands enduring work. Frith (2015) analyses this gendered work with the term 'sexercise' which describes how sex life requires women's investment. In turn, Cacchioni (2007, 2015; Gupta and Cacchioni 2013) examines gendered non-commercial sex work and the medicalisation of sex by using the concepts of discipline, avoidance, and performance work. These studies have provided us with a fruitful foundation for analysing how heterosexual women's sexuality and sexual pleasure are made into the objects of work and exercise. However, the aim of our analysis is to capture the contradictions of this gendered work.

Cacchioni (2007, 2015; Gupta and Cacchioni 2013) has taken into account heterosexual women's mental discipline as well as the physiological level of gendered sex work when defining 'discipline work' as "sex work aimed at changing one's mental and physical response to standard heterosexual sexual practices" (Cacchioni, 2007: 307). In our analysis of Finnish sex manuals we found a lack of such conceptualisation that highlights the specificities of heterosexual practices. Therefore, we have extended Cacchioni's concept of mental discipline

using the term ‘heterosexercise’ to analyse how power constitutes paradoxical subject positions for heterosexual women. This term enables us to capture how the analysed exercises challenge, as well as maintain, the gendered power imbalances of heterosexual practices.

In our analysis, we are interested in making visible the contradiction of mental sex work that arises when heterosexual women are encouraged to work and exercise their minds in order to develop a heterosexual mindspace. Here we rely on Wittig (1992), who has introduced the notion of a ‘straight mind’ when conceptualising heterosexuality as *a state of mind* (emphasis by the authors). Building on this, we propose that women are guided to heterosexercise their minds when they are encouraged to modify their heterosexual mindscapes in order to increase their sexual pleasure. This focus on the psychological level highlights how women are encouraged to revise their attitudes towards heterosexual practices. Furthermore, the term heterosexercise highlights how the analysed exercises are perpetually heteronormative practices that deepen women’s self-understanding as heterosexual subjects. Thus, the focus on heterosexercise emphasises how mental regulations engender and maintain women’s heterosexual subjectivities.

We are interested in understanding how the possibilities of both gender and sexual equality appear together with even more regulatory and pernicious forms of sexism embedded in heterosexual practices. Doing such an analysis in a Nordic context, where the ideals of gender equality prevail, more than just a postfeminist framework is needed as Mühleisen (2007) has argued. We cannot simply rely on a critique of postfeminism, but need a framework that can also account specifically for Nordic pursuit of gender and sexual equality.

In critical studies of heterosexuality, theories of gendered power relations and gender hierarchies have been crucial (Beasley et al., 2015: 683), just as in feminist studies. Without diminishing the significance of gender hierarchies, Beasley (2015) has emphasised the salience of conceptualising the multiplicity of heterosexualities. A growing body of literature recognises the importance of examining heterosexuality as a constantly changing practice rather than a monolithic entity (Beasley, 2011; Beasley et al., 2012, 2015; Brook et al., 2015). For us, the frameworks of both feminist theories on postfeminism and critical studies of heterosexuality offer theoretical tools to investigate the complexities and paradoxes which lie in the production of heterosexual practices. In the exercises promoted in the manuals, both restrictive and normalising power, and opportunities for heterosexual women’s autonomy and freedom, reside hand in hand (see Allen 2011; Foucault, 1990: 157). Hence in our analysis, power is perceived as a productive constitution rather than a restrictive one.

### **Data, methods, and analytical approach**

In Finland, a total of 50 sex manuals were published between 2005 and 2015, including manuals translated from other languages. Most of these manuals targeted heterosexual couples. The analysis presented here is based on a detailed examination of those sex manuals that specifically target heterosexual adult women and were originally written in Finnish. The five popular sex manuals analysed here are authored by sexologists, sex therapists, physicians, sex educators, and physiotherapists, with all but one of the authors being women (Heusala, 2010, 2011).

Despite the popular nature of the books, each adopts an authoritative and professional tone and includes only a few images. More than one edition has been published of three of the books (Heusala, 2010, 2011; Ranta 2008).

The main goal of the manuals analysed in this research is to increase women's awareness of their sexuality and hence their sexual pleasure. To accomplish this, women are guided to work on and exercise their sexuality. In all the manuals, the most evident aspect of exercise is a bodily one that emphasises exercising on the physiological level (especially Heusala, 2010, 2011). However, this study seeks to analyse the mental regulation of a heterosexual women's mindscape. Accordingly, we examine how women's thoughts and attitudes, their heterosexual mindscapes, also become the subjects of exercise in the manuals – with the aim of enhancing women's sexual pleasure. The modification of the heterosexual mindscape is emphasised differently in each of the analysed sex manuals. Some of the manuals allude to questions of gender equality (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011), another highlights issues regarding sexual equality (especially Ranta, 2008), and one emphasises the salience of a sexy mindscape (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011). However, the central themes analysed in this article appear in all five of the sex manuals.

We applied thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) as our starting point for the identification of the different dimensions within the textual data set. At the very beginning of the analysis, we examined what women are specifically encouraged to exercise in the Finnish sex manuals investigated, which led us to recognise the centrality of sexual pleasure. Then in a detailed examination of the exercises recommended for achieving sexual pleasure, we found the themes of both gender and sexual equality to be crucial. The thematic analysis has been informed by critiques of postfeminist sexuality, which bring up issues of sexism (Frith, 2015; Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2009), as well as by critical studies of heterosexuality, which highlight heterosexuality as a changing practice and offer theoretical tools for examining its complexities (Beasley, 2011; Beasley et al., 2012, 2015; Brook et al., 2015). This framework enables us to concentrate on how the themes of gender equality and sexual equality arise along with sexism. In the analysis we examine the ways in which women are invited to heterosexercise 1) gender equality, 2) sexual equality, and 3) the sexy mindscape. Throughout this analysis, we have chosen the most illustrative extracts from the sex manuals investigated as descriptive examples. Next, we turn to the methods for heterosexercising gender equality.

### **Heterosexercising gender equality**

When discussing gender equality, the manuals connect women's sexuality to domestic tasks and childcare. Domestic life is described as stressful and wearing for women, as the following example illustrates: 'A woman's capacity for enjoyment is often also linked to how stressed she feels: if she has many little ones to look after and one big one pestering her for sex, an orgasm may not be in the cards at all' (Ranta, 2008: 52). Here, the demands posed by a woman's children and spouse play a significant role in diminishing her orgasmic pleasure. The following example implies something similar: 'Many women juggle their career and family

simultaneously and, on top of that, go to the gym three times a week. There's rarely any energy left for sexual interaction' (Heusala, 2010: 252). Additionally, the same author cites a sex survey indicating that 'during sex, 57 percent of women think about chores still to be done, such as cleaning, cooking, laundry or washing up' (Heusala, 2011: 114). In these statements, readers are invited to recognise that it is impossible for women to concentrate on sex in such circumstances. When examining the illustrative examples above, we can observe that these texts create an awareness of heterosexual women's sexual presence, activity, and pleasures, which are deemed vulnerable in the context of domestic life.

In the manuals investigated, women are encouraged to strive for equality in domestic life. Heterosexual sex, domestic tasks, and childcare are linked in the following example: 'Sharing the responsibility for household work, reorganising childcare and assessing your accustomed routines ... may be the first step towards finding the energy and time for sex, too.' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 125). In this extract, the re-distribution and rethinking of domestic responsibilities are presented as crucial for women who want to pursue an active sex life. Similar implications can be observed in the following statement: 'In the best case, the parents are able to share the responsibility for caring for the child' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 163). Here, women are encouraged to strive for gender equality in caring for children.

The Nordic equality policy encompasses an understanding of shared responsibility in the area of care and housework and therefore promotes the idea of participating fathers (Hobson and Morgan, 2002; Julkunen, 2010: 90–91, 157). Overall, heterosexual couples do not achieve these ideals on a daily basis. Several scholars have suggested that in Finland, gender inequality in domestic life burdens women living in intimate heterosexual relationships, where women bear the main responsibility for family matters (e.g., Anttila, 2012; Jokinen, 2010; Miettinen, 2008).

Traditional attitudes which underpin and maintain gender hierarchies prevent the further expansion of gender equality, which is evident in the following example:

Sexual problems in intimate relationships may also be caused by household chores. If a man does not participate in chores around the house, the woman has no desire to have sex with a man like that. In women's stories, such vicious circles are more than common. Having started a relationship, you have also committed to having sex. No one is likely to announce that unless you do the dishes every second day and take out the trash, you'll have no sex (Kivijärvi, 2005: 70).

In the earlier examples, the vulnerability of women's sexuality is recognised in the context of domestic inequalities, whereas the example above completely disregards this understanding, since women are urged to have sex despite of the unequal circumstances.

The examined sex manuals suggest that women can instead have a satisfying sex life outside of a long-term intimate relationship. This emphasis is particularly apparent when discussing women's lack of desire: 'The lack of desire disappeared when some of them found themselves a new partner in life and love burgeoned again' (Heusala, 2010: 253). It is notable

that in this statement, women's sexual desire is associated with a new and flourishing relationship rather than a long-term heterosexual relationship. Thus, instead of pursuing women's pleasure and desire within a shared home, women's sexual desire is positioned outside of an enduring heterosexual relationship.

In addition to traditional marriages, monogamous domestic relationships are common in Finland. Moreover, in Finland, women's financial independence enables living apart together relationships, as well as the possibility of leaving an unequal heterosexual intimate relationship. Therefore, the texts can go one step further by proposing that it may be better for heterosexual women to live apart from their partners. This understanding is presented specifically in the context of women's sexual desire:

A woman might never stop feeling desire if she could retain the state of being in love forever. In order to retain a strong, spontaneous desire in her life, a woman should live at a great distance from her beloved or change partners after every couple of years. However, since most intimate relationships eventually stabilise, lack of desire will also enter the picture.... This is a problem related to intimate relationships, not just to women (Kivijärvi, 2005: 92).

In the example above, women's lack of sexual desire is interpreted as a problem inherent in stable intimate heterosexual relationships rather than an individual disorder experienced by women. Women's spontaneous and strong sexual desires are associated with situations in which a couple does not cohabit or is not involved in an enduring heterosexual relationship. Interestingly enough, when the sex manuals discuss women's need for a fresh start, they do not address socially enforced gender roles in the division of domestic tasks. Hence, the blooming of women's sexual desires outside an enduring heterosexual relationship is illustrated, but the reasons for that phenomenon remain unexplored.

The sex manuals analysed in this study draw attention to the power imbalances in heterosexual relationships when they encourage women to heterosexercise gender equality: it can be done by sharing domestic tasks and childcare responsibilities with their spouses. Thus, in the Finnish context, sex manuals may suggest that heterosexercising gender equality is crucial for heterosexual women to enjoy an active and pleasurable sex life. In general, acknowledging the role of gender inequality in diminishing women's capacities for sexual desire would provide a critical perspective on the continuous attempts to medicalise women's sexual desire. The dismantling of heterosexual power imbalances could lead to worthy alternatives to medicalisation. If the reshaping of women's sexual desire in the broader context of heterosexual power imbalances becomes more pronounced, it would be possible to suggest that increasing gender equality, or even living apart together, could be an effective remedy for the narrow domestic role that diminishes heterosexual women's capacity to experience sexual desire.

## **Heterosexercising sexual equality**

In the previous section, we analysed how women are encouraged to heterosexercise *gender* equality in order to have a pleasurable sex life. However, when the manuals debate questions of equality, their main focus is on *sexual* equality and heterosexual sex practises. The sex manuals analysed in the present study instruct women to adopt a more active role in their sexual relationships. Women are encouraged to find their own sexual subjectivity, and they are advised to pay attention to their own pleasures and desires. According to the manuals, women's sexual passivity is considered to be barrier to both women's desire and their orgasmic pleasure, as illustrated in the following extract: 'How can you want to have sex or 'get your orgasm' if you are too polite to express what you want?' (Ranta, 2008: 53). In this statement, a woman's sexual initiative is presented as the most crucial element for experiencing desire and pleasure. The following example conveys a similar implication: 'She may not know how to say what she really wants or may feel too embarrassed to say it' (Ranta, 2008: 117). It is notable that women are portrayed as being uncertain about their own desires. Consequently, readers are invited to recognise that women's awkwardness and unfamiliarity with expressing their own will is problematic.

The Finnish manuals examined suggest that in the context of heterosexual relationships, male sexual privilege poses a considerable challenge to women's self-expression. For example, women are guided to dispute their objectification: 'People sometimes think or feel themselves to be objects during sex. If that happens, it is the partner's desires and wishes that seem to have the main role.... But what if you simply find the courage to be more active and to move more in the direction of your own desires?' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 269). Here, women are urged to discover their own sexual subjectivity instead of persevering merely as an object of their partner's desires. The potential for women to identify and express their own desires is depicted as complicated and challenging, as the following example demonstrates: 'Another thing that easily erodes sexual desire is if your partner continuously sets conditions on your sexual interaction' (Heusala, 2010: 253). Heterosexual practices are presented here as male-dominated, and this male-centred bias of sexuality is perceived as a convention that diminishes women's sexual desires.

The male bias of sexuality and male sexual privilege are discussed in all of the sex manuals investigated. For instance, the texts acknowledge that historically, women have been granted only a narrow sexual role and consequently now attempt to revise these unequal heterosexual practices. However, this aim appears difficult to achieve: 'It is hard work trying to change the negative label that throughout history has been associated with a woman who enjoys her sexuality' (Ranta, 2008: 19). The following statement highlights the gender bias of sexuality, which limits women's sexual subjectivity: 'Surprisingly many women who do not experience an orgasm continue to believe in the model that dictates that a woman should be a sexually passive, unselfish partner who only thinks of the man's satisfaction' (Heusala, 2010: 98). Heterosexuality is presented in this statement as a problematic and unequal practise that follows male expectations and ensures men's satisfaction. Therefore, even women's sexual liberation is perceived as questionable in the context of male-centred sexuality: 'As women began to experience a sexual liberation some decades ago, this was more a liberation for men, not for the



women themselves' (Ranta, 2008: 63). Such statements alert readers to male privilege and women's subordination in the heterosexual context.

The manuals call for awareness of the gender hierarchies involved in heterosexual practices, and women are invited to make room for their own pleasure. To ensure women's orgasmic pleasure, the manuals encourage women to desist from concentrating unilaterally on men's pleasure, as the following example demonstrates: 'In the enjoyment of sex, it is time to forget spectators and settings...at the same time, we must forget the focus on giving pleasure and expressing enjoyment (the way you moan and squirm) and whether your hair looks nice' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 45). Notably, women are encouraged not only to abandon efforts to please their partners but also to stop focusing on their own displays of pleasure. In a similar vein, the following description underlines the problematic aspects of unequal heterosexual practices: 'Something is wrong if the woman always only immerses herself in her partner's enjoyment' (Heusala, 2011: 120). As the quote suggests, a fundamental problem in the heterosexual context is that traditionally there has been little space for women to own their pleasure; consequently, the manuals emphasise the crucial importance of women's selfishness. The following example illustrates this notion, demanding 'a kind of selfishness that allows you to experience orgasm' (Ranta, 2008: 105). Here, a requisite level of selfishness reveals the possibility of achieving orgasmic pleasure.

The sex manuals examined here invite readers to heterosexercise sexual equality while encouraging heterosexual women to find their sexual subjectivity and to challenge male privilege. This critical focus on heterosexual positions invites women to reflect on their sexuality in the context of hierarchical heterosexual sex practices. The sex manuals investigated highlight those gendered hierarchies that deny and reduce women's opportunities to find their own sexual subjectivities. It is understandable, in the Finnish discourses of equality and strong women (Julkunen, 2016; Koivunen, 2003), that women are encouraged to exercise sexual equality by internalising more egalitarian forms of heterosex. By noting the power imbalances embedded in heterosexual practises, the manuals suggest that heterosexercising sexual equality is indispensable in women's quest for sexual pleasure.

Despite the strong emphasis on sexual equality, the pressure to have sex remains visible in one of the manuals: 'Even if you really do not feel like it, you should be able to manage having sex at least once a week, if only to please your partner. A woman can have no rational grounds for saying that 10 to 15 minutes a week is too much' (Kivijärvi, 2005: 159). In this context, sexuality becomes an obligation rather than entitlement (Braun et al., 2003: 254–256). This example highlights the persistence of gendered power imbalances, which reduce women's sexual subjectivity.

The emphasis on sexual equality and women's sexual subjectivity exhibits similarities to feminist approaches that have criticised and challenged male privilege and male-centred bias in sexuality (e.g., Fine 1988; Jackson and Scott, 2001; Tolman, 2012). However, the manuals guide women to heterosexercise by striving mainly for orgasmic pleasure; hence, the male-centred focus on straightforward orgasmic pleasure remains untouched. This shows how the orgasmic imperative is characteristic to contemporary discourses of sexuality, as Frith (2013,

2015) has noted. The orgasmic imperative has been widely criticised by feminists as a convention that denounces the absence of orgasm as abnormal and dysfunctional (Frith, 2013; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Potts, 2000). In the manuals, women are guided to heterosexercise sexual equality by learning a narrow and strict form of orgasmic pleasure, rather than by exploring a wide spectrum of sexual pleasures. This unilateral concentration on orgasmic satisfaction diminishes the potential for heterosexual women to own their diverse sensual and sexual pleasures.

### **Heterosexercising the sexy mindscape**

The manuals examined encourage women to heterosexercise sexual equality by focusing on their own desires and pleasures. Nevertheless, the goals of achieving both gender and sexual equality are set aside when women are encouraged to heterosexercise in order to adjust their sexy mindscapes. Women's negative self-image is a prominent discourse in the contemporary sex manuals included in this study. The texts turn their attention to women's body image when underscoring the pivotal importance of women's attitude of approbation towards their own bodies in order to be able to achieve sexual pleasure. Consequently, women are encouraged to overcome their negative self-image, with the central focus of exercise being on women's minds rather than their physicality. For example, one central theme is body negativity that women are assumed to experience: 'Dissatisfaction with one's own appearance often contributes to many sexual problems of women' (Kivijärvi, 2005: 124). Here, readers are invited to recognise how body dissatisfaction damages women's capacity to enjoy sex.

The sex manuals intertwine women's self-acceptance with their sexiness. Consequently, positive self-image is accompanied by sexiness, as the following extract suggests: 'The most common cause of negative feelings is a self-image that is not sufficiently good and sexy' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 232). The sex manuals emphasise the association of a positive self-image with women's recognition of their own attractiveness and desirability. Hence, a woman's own attitude is the most crucial element in conveying sexiness, as illustrated by the following example: 'If you consider yourself beautiful and desirable and carry your body, whatever it is like, and your clothes with style and flair, this will also convey to others an impression of contentment, sexiness and desirability' (Kivijärvi, 2005: 124). In this example, sexiness, desirability, and attractiveness are constructed as emerging from a positive state of mind.

The manuals typically encourage women to work and exercise on themselves, especially with respect to their own attitudes and self-image. Women are advised to recognise the sexiness of their entire body and urged to express their sexiness to their partner without shame: 'At best, a woman thinks that she is sexy altogether, and she can also flaunt her sexiness to her partner' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 230). Here, women's own attitude toward their bodies is of utmost importance because it enables sexy performance for a partner. In this regard, Cacchioni's (2007, 2013, 2015) idea of performance work is revealing: work is done for the partner's pleasure.

Since Finnish women traditionally display very low-key femininity (Laukkanen, 2012), one of the manuals encourages women to exercise the right attitude in front of a mirror:

You can also practice different situations in front of a mirror. Practising how you carry yourself, the effective use of gestures and facial expressions, learning how to move gracefully can best be done in front of a mirror. You can learn how to flirt and to cast seductive looks with your image in the mirror.... You can also happily flaunt your body like this during sex. Again, this is a possibility, not a requirement. Not only may your partner enjoy it when you boldly show your graces, but over time, it may also increase your self-confidence and thus your own enjoyment (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 194).

In this extract, women are encouraged to exercise a specific type of movement and performance, and are urged to use these learned skills during heterosexual sex to increase opportunities for reciprocal pleasure. Here, a woman's sexual pleasure becomes possible through both her partner's enjoyment of the sexy show and her increasing self-confidence and certainty. Hence, the construction of women's sexual subjectivity requires achieving an adequately sexy mindscape. Sexiness is also presented as an expedient that enables women to express their own desire: 'Would wearing fishnet stockings and a corset to breakfast be enough to make a work-oriented partner realise that he is living with a sexy and willing woman?' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 127).

The examined sex manuals counsel women to revise their attitudes towards their own sexuality at life's turning points. For example, pregnancy, illness, and ageing are regarded as situations that demand readjustment of one's attitude. In the following example, women are encouraged to rebuild their self-image: 'Even after falling ill, you have to re-discover your attractiveness and sexiness if you want to continue enjoying sexual intimacy.... You may have to learn a new way of flirting and admiring yourself' (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 293). In this extract, the rediscovery of one's own attractiveness and sexiness becomes a prerequisite for sexual closeness, pleasure, and for women's sexual subjectivity. In the next example, we can observe how sexuality and sexiness become inseparable:

Sexuality is an internal characteristic that you can call forth or hide and cover. If you do not feel you are sexy, others may also fail to see your sexiness.... This means that sexiness is not only about your external appearance, which may be captured in a photo, but also about the experience and idea you have of yourself (Korteniemi-Poikela and Cacciatore, 2011: 230).

Here, a sexy mindscape is indispensable for women's self-understanding as a sexual being. The sexy state of mind becomes crucial within the context of heterosexuality; therefore, in our interpretation, women are guided to heterosexercise their minds using the most penetrating methods.

When women are encouraged to adjust their attitudes towards their own bodies, the focus is on the woman herself, not the broader social context. Such a postfeminist view of women's sexuality is central in one of the books investigated (Korteniemi-Poikela and

Cacciatore, 2011). Such an individualised and depoliticised postfeminist understanding renders the power relations of heterosexuality invisible and irrelevant (Frith, 2015; Gill, 2009). Hence, women are encouraged to adopt sexual subject positions that leave gender hierarchies and power relations intact. Furthermore, when women are exhorted to find pleasure in their own sexy body, they are advised to internalise the male gaze. Thus, the shift from bodily to mental regulation perpetuates and cements the pernicious regulation of heterosexual women's sexual subjectivity.

### **Conclusion: Perils and possibilities of a heterosexual mindscape**

Our analysis sheds light on the paradoxes of heterosexual women's sexual subjectivities by asking how Finnish sex manuals encourage heterosexual women to improve gender and sexual equality, as well as develop a sexy mindscape in order to increase their sexual pleasure. These paradoxes have been analysed by using the term heterosexercise, which highlights the production of heterosexuality as a state of mind. We have been interested in how the issues of both gender and sexual equality are actualised in a Finnish context, in which women have been able to achieve increased independence by attaining political power, and economic and social security.

Lister (2009) has analysed the Nordic models of gender equality and noted the paradoxes between the gap of gender equality rhetoric and the reality of everyday lives. The breadth of this gap is also tangible in several Finnish studies, which shed light on the structural inequality in heterosexual intimate relationships by emphasising how domestic life specifically burdens women (e.g., Anttila, 2012; Jokinen, 2010; Miettinen, 2008). In our study of Finnish sex manuals we add the dimension of heterosexual intimacy to these analysis.

Our findings suggest that the manuals note the power imbalances embedded in heterosexual practises when encouraging women to heterosexercise both gender and sexual equality by engaging in more egalitarian forms of heterosexual sex. However, these recognitions of equality contain paradoxes. First, the manuals recognise the sexual pleasure and desire of heterosexual women as vulnerable if they cohabit with their partners, due to the burden of the gendered division of domestic work – something that continues to be a striking feature of heterosexual intimate relationships. Thus, the gendered division of labour in the home is recognised, but nevertheless mainly bypassed or even disregarded. Secondly, the manuals' central mission relates to increasing women's sexual pleasure and sexual equality while paving the way for women's active and orgasmic sexual subjectivity. Therefore, the exercises suggested for increasing sexual equality encourage women to adopt the mainly male-centred straightforward focus on orgasmic pleasure. Thirdly, the sex manuals maintain gender hierarchies by encouraging women to internalise the male gaze and to adopt a sexist attitude towards their own bodies. Hence, with regard to heterosexercising sexiness, the topics of both gender and sexual equality are completely bypassed.

In the examined manuals, gender equality plays a lesser role than questions of sexual equality. It appears that the manuals propagate sexual equality without acknowledging the

salience of biased gender arrangements in a heterosexual relationship. The manuals suggest that achieving sexual equality is possible without considering comprehensive gender equality politics. In practice, however, it is nearly impossible to achieve sexual equality under unequal conditions. Our analysis illuminates the cruelty of heterosexercise when manuals encourage women to aim for sexual, and specifically orgasmic, improvement while leaving the power imbalances of heterosexual relationships largely intact.

Moreover, the sex manuals maintain gender hierarchies by encouraging women to internalise the male gaze and to adopt sexist attitudes towards their own bodies. In this process, women's sexual subjectivity becomes intertwined with heterosexual power imbalances – which in turn become even more intensely pronounced. According to Gill (2009), sexist attitudes towards one's own body make it even harder to revise gender hierarchies. This is a major challenge, as critiques of postfeminist sexuality have implied (Brown-Bowers et al., 2015; Gavey, 2012; Moran, 2017). Consequently, the sex manuals examined here rely on normative, oppressive power when guiding women to objectify themselves in accordance with male-centred discourses of sexuality.

In the sex manuals investigated, heterosexual women are guided to heterosexercise in order to transform their thoughts and attitudes about their own sexuality and sexual interactions. Therefore, the manuals treat women's sexual subjectivity in terms of what Foucauldian scholars understand as 'governing the soul' (Blackman, 2004; Rose, 1990). Several studies have documented that such a shift from bodily to psychic regulation increases the intensity of sexist self-surveillance (Gill, 2009; Gill and Elias, 2014). Our analysis of the sex manuals demonstrates however, that the mental adjustment of heterosexual mindscapes enables alongside new pernicious forms of sexism an increasingly detailed and subtle criticism of heterosexual power imbalances and sexual inequality. Hence, these sex manuals' attempts to increase both gender and sexual equality entails the possibility of a more profound understanding of how gender inequality and women's sexual subjectivity are intertwined.

Although the sex manuals include the intended positive meanings of sexual equality, this arrangement also appears to be highly problematic when sex manuals encourage women to simply adopt sexual subjectivities that are equal to those of men without problematising the male-centred bias of sexual pleasure. Thus, the question regarding the types of sexual pleasures worth pursuing remains unasked. Another fundamental problem lies in the scope of heterosexercising: it relies on a heteronormative understanding of woman's sexual identity. Hence, when its underlying principle relies on an unquestioned heterosexual identity, women's exercises of pleasure can allegedly occur only in the context of heterosexuality. Therefore, heterosexercising provides opportunities for women to achieve sexual equality only by deepening the normative power of heterosexuality.

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